NEW ART examiner
Est: 1973
The Independent Voice of the Visual Arts

Rigoberto Luna, Neil Fauerso Leslie Moody Castro and Darren Jones on art and its impact in San Antonio and South Texas.

Also in this issue

Sam Vangheluwe on **David Hockney** in **Belgium**
Rudolf Baranik in **Russia**
Liviana Martin in **Italy**
Mary Fletcher in **Cornwall**

Volume 36 No.3 Jan / Feb 2022 £4.50 / $6.50 / €5.30

SAN ANTONIO AND SOUTH TEXAS

BLAZING CRUCIBLES AND A HARD-DRIVING VANGUARD OF ART AND LABOR IN AMERICA

The New Art Examiner is the product of the thinking and life-long contribution of Jane Addams Allen. We thank you in her name for reading her independent journal of art criticism.
If you have an interest in our venture, please consult Google, also Art Cornwall, for an interview with the publisher, Derek Guthrie, a painter who keeps his art practice private.
The New Art Examiner has a long history of producing quality and independent art criticism. Any art scene, needs writers to keep a professional eye on art activity. Otherwise, insider trading will determine success in this troubled art world.
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All editions include the digital issue sent via e-mail.
Subscription rates for 6 issues print and digital:

UK	£42.00	postage incl.
Europe	€54.50	postage incl.
USA	$65	postage incl.
World	$80	postage incl.

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Subscriptions to the New Art Examiner in 2022-23 are £42 ($67) for six issues
Digital subscription $5.00 annually (£3.60) - more a donation than a subscription
Individual copies are £4.50 ($7.00) plus postage £2.50 ($2) or $2 each as a download from www.newartexaminer.net

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The Attentive Artist

Japanese and Korean elites enjoyed appreciating Chinese landscapes through the imagery of poetry because most could not travel to China. Even though some diplomatic delegations were dispatched there, they could not journey to all the mountains and rivers described in the poems. Because most of the poems related to paintings, were written during poets occlusion or exile, the poetic settings were usually far from the capitals which the Japanese and Korean delegations visited. Among the Chinese landscape paintings based on poems that affected Japanese and Korean art, three representative themes of landscapes are Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers, Gazing at a Waterfall, and West Lake. *(ed: not shown)*

Japanese and Korean Art The Lure of Painted Poetry
Cleveland Museum of Art 2011 p23

Painting Party, 1880 Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831-1889), Meiji Period, Japan

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The New Art Examiner is a not-for-profit organization whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.

IN THIS ISSUE YOUR CONTRIBUTORS ARE:

RUDOLF BARANIK was a New York artist whose works are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, and the Hirshorn Museum. The paintings of Rudolf Baranik are increasingly thought to be among the most important works of the New York School painting of the 1960s and 1970s, with the late paintings in particular considered by American art critic, Donald Kuspit, "the true climax of fifty years of Western abstract painting."

LESLIE MOODY CASTRO is an independent curator and writer based in Mexico City and Texas, where she has produced and organized projects for more than a decade. Her practice relies on itinerancy and collaboration, while the range of her critical writing and exhibitions illustrate her commitment to concepts of place. In addition to the belief that the visual arts can create moments of empathy, Moody Castro also believes that mariachis make everything better.

GRAZIELLA COLOMBO lives in Milan, Italy. She has a degree in foreign languages and literature and has taught for many years. She is a volunteer and guide at the Diocesan Museum of Milan. She has always had a passion for art that is one of the things in which Italy excels.

NEIL FAUERSO is a writer, teacher, and lawyer. He is one of the co-founders of the modern classical record label, *Unseen Worlds*, and often organizes concerts and other events.

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PABLO HALGUERA is an artist, performer, author, and educator. From 2007 to 2020 he was Director of Adult and Academic Programs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. He currently is an Assistant Professor at the College of Performing Arts at the New School.

DARREN JONES is an art critic, curator, and educator. His writing has appeared in *Artforum, ArtUS, Brooklyn Rail, Artslant* and *Artsy*. He is a contributing editor for the *New Art Examiner*. Curatorial and artistic projects have been covered in *The Guardian, Washington Post, Artforum.com, Huffington Post,* and *Scotland on Sunday*. Jones' book*, The Contemporary Art Gallery: Display, Power and Privilege,* (co-authored with David Carrier) was published in 2016; in 2018 he was a recipient of an Andy Warhol Foundation Art Writers Grant. He currently teaches Curatorial Studies, at the Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore. Jones lives in Fire Island Pines, New York, and Key West, Florida.

RIGOBERTO LUNA is the Co-founder and Director of the Presa House Gallery in San Antonio, TX. He's developed numerous exhibitions focusing on Central and South Texas Latinx artists. Additionally, Luna works at the San Antonio Museum of Art.

LIVIANA MARTIN was born in Northern Italy and lives in Milan. She has a degree in Philosophy and she taught for many years. She is keen on ancient and contemporary art, because she is absolutely confident that " the beauty will save the world".

DANIEL NANAVATI is the European editor of the *New Art Examiner*, author of many children's books and sometime poet. He runs www.footstepsbooks.com.

ELEONORA SCHIANCHI was born in Sassuolo, near Modena, and graduated at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna in teaching and communication of arts. She is currently an AMaC student at the University of Bologna, and an art mediator at Musei Civici in Reggio Emilia. She has cultivated a passion for photography through travelling widely across Europe. Art is a powerful communicative tool and she explores its inclinations with passion and curiosity.

SHÄNNE SANDS is a poet and author. Her non-fiction work *Bombay City of Sands* was reviewed as one of the most lyrical books ever written. She was the first writer to deal with drug addiction in the UK in *Is Rosemary Your Daughter?*

If you have ideas for articles or are a writer please get in touch:
contributor@newartexaminer.net

Letters

Did Marcel Duchamp pave the way for Donald Trump?

Reply to Virginia Eichhorn:
The best is yet to come.
Ian Russo, 03/10/2021

Editor,
I've begun looking into the intersection between humour + visual art + writing this past, unfunny COVID year. M. Legrady's well-supported think-piece (bolstered by his teasing artworks) is a bracing counter to shaky academic precepts about facture and diligent practice. Putting air-quotes around a proposition doesn't automatically elevate it to the status of art. Now added to my insight-trove is the final quote from Oscar Wilde to the effect that honest, combative artists must keep 'em laughing to avoid being squashed like a bug. Wondering about Maurizio Cattelan…
Betty Ann Jordan 30/09/2021

NFTS Are Not Your Enemy, But You Might Be
Editor,
Excellent article!
Very informative, comprehensive coverage of the emerged concept of NFTs and how they will penetrate into the evolving domains of digital transactions.
Mehmet Candas 05/12/2021

Modernism, Post-Modernism, Remodernism

Editor,
I have just come across the three excellent articles from Charles Thomson in 2017. I did not know much about the Stuckists, though I knew they were myriad in number, but his clarity of thought on the art system since the 1980s and his incisive views are eye-openers. The value system is completely askew and the educational foundations of art colleges have been judiciously swept of any semblance of original thinking.
It goaded the German Expressionist, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, to falsify dates. It caused Andy Warhol to stop the art he was making. It made Damien Hirst so angry he smashed up a kitchen.
One of his key observations "Already the dynamic of Modernism was defined with the need for originality via difference, necessitating innovation and invention, which also meant inevitably narrower focus and increasing specialisation" is tragically insightful.
George Haton 26/12/2021

Coming in the next issue

Scott Winfield Sublett gives us another perceptive spin on the moving picture industry from his new vantage point in New York

Margaret Lanterman looks over Chicago

We celebrate the return of Bridge

Letters, Reviews and more ...

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QUOTE of the Month:

"What distinguishes modern art from the art of other ages is criticism."

Octavio Paz

NEW ART examiner CiC

January 2022
Volume 36. No.3

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UK Distributor: Central Books, London

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The New Art Examiner is indexed in:
Art Bibliographies Modern, Art Full Text & Art Index Retrospective and Zetoc. It is in the British Library, Bodleian Libraries of the University of Oxford, Cambridge University Library, The National Library of Scotland, The Library of Trinity College, Dublin,The National Library of Wales, The Smithsonian, Washington DC.

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The *New Art Examiner* is published from and registered in the UK.

EDITORIAL

The final, great block on the imagination and practice of any artist is their own ability to self-censor. To limit what they do because they are scared to be criticised. As if anyone who calls themselves an artist should be fearful of someone thinking differently from themselves? As if they should worry about someone looking over the artist's shoulder being critical because the artist thinks differently from them.

To narrow your focus to please others is not the artistic temperament. Look at what Rudolph Baranik says in the archive piece at the end of this issue:

"Philip Guston once wrote that when he starts to paint, four silent guests sit in the corner of his loft: a leading critic, a museum curator, an art historian, and a respected friend. But as he goes on working the intruders silently get up and leave one after another. During the long period of oppression a different set of intruders sat in the corners of the Crown studios of Soviet artists: a party ideologue, a critic from the party-controlled art press, an academic art historian, and a representative from the bureaucratic artists union. The union-controlled exhibitions, prizes, sales, commissions, and creative assignments – paid stays in the countryside on the warm seashore of the Crimea. From my talks with Soviet artists and visits to their studios it became clear that the post-*glasnost* intruders are as follows: a dealer from New York, a reporter from *Flash Art*, a collector from Germany and an art lover from the fashionable technocrat set."

You should have a very select group you call upon to sit with you when you paint and none of them should dictate where your brush goes. In fact across all art forms, which can be very lonely pursuits, the voices in your head should be controlled by the artist. If you have conflicting advice from several sides you won't produce anything of value to the history of art.

This is not the same as never being satisfied with your work. So many artists have rarely been satisfied with their work it is almost true to say it is one of the marks of an artist. Striving for better, striving to be clearer about intent and 'message' is what art hungers after. But choosing not to do something for fear of public reaction; limiting the subject matter for fear of offending; these are not the instincts of an artist. And it goes way beyond the political. The artist may comment as they wish upon anything, at any time.

And many of you do, but you pay the price. The price, which makes cowards of so many, is that you will get nowhere with politically correct curators, grant bodies and trustees. But then you will have some satisfaction in looking at those who do get on with those people and knowing what cowards they are and how they play the system in front of them.

That limits and finally negates their contribution to human culture.

Daniel Benshana

SPEAKEASY

Each issue, the *New Art Examiner* invites a well-known, or not so well-known, art world personality to write a speakeasy essay on a topic of interest.

ELEONORA SCHIANCHI graduated in Teaching and Communication of Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna. She is currently an AMaC student at the University of Bologna, and an art mediator at Musei Civici in Reggio Emilia. Art is a powerful communicative tool and she explores its inclinations with passion and curiosity.

FALLING PIECES: ACADEMY VS UNIVERSITY

Eleonora Schianchi

As a student, I necessarily find myself wondering which educational path would best suit my future career. I have always been passionate about art and, for as long as I can remember, I have always been advised not to devote myself to it. I was born and raised in Italy, the country of wonders in terms of artistic and cultural heritage. Tourism holds a good slice of the economy. Travellers are eager to visit and soak up the magical aura that exudes from every pore of the Boot of Europe.

With treasures of this kind in abundance, the educational system should provide the right tools to make future professional artists. The country's devotion to culture has always been underpinned by its investment in internationally respected universities. The University of Bologna is the most ancient university in the world (established in 1088). It provides a wide range of courses for conservation, restoration, media, and media production; in the same city, the Academy of Fine Arts has trained artists since its foundation in the 18th century.

During my bachelor's degree in Art Teaching and Communication at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, I was surrounded by other artists, but the actual opportunities to collaborate with them were surprisingly few. Furthermore, the means provided during the course, as well as the teaching methods employed, often proved to be unstructured, disorganized, or not practically useful for work purposes. Once I started the Master's in Arts, Museology and Curatorship at the University of Bologna, the differences became so palpable that they needed to be voiced. The University offers a wider variety of opportunities than the Academy and displayed better co-ordination within and outside the institution itself, but lacked, most of the time, space for artists themselves. Only a few courses are devoted to production while the Academy clearly remains a leader in practical courses, especially in painting, sculpture and applied arts.

Nevertheless, and interestingly enough, the separation between makers and theorists in the arts has always existed: it's the Academy vs the University. One must make peace with it: despite numerous efforts, including some implementation of both theoretical and practical courses, and the equivalence, guaranteed not long ago, of the two, it seems like the system is not ready to provide continuity and direct relations between the different professionals working in the arts. Renato Barilli, art critic and scholar, defines this separation as a "fragile and almost invisible wall between the two" (Barilli R., *Artribune*, N.59, March-June 2021). This lack of exchange, in his opinion, is also visible in the difference in incomes the professors receive (much lower in the Academies) and with often no possibility for them to switch from one environment to the other.

This division does not favour collaboration, empathy, or creation, and this in turn causes a rupture that shakes the whole structure to its foundations. The collision is inevitable, and the contrasts that result from it show the real obsolescence of the present system, both in terms of education and work. How can knowledge, from creation to communication, flow naturally if it is thought, organized and transmitted in such different ways, and if there is almost no permeability between the two worlds?

Barilli finds the solution in the organization of the already well-established Departments of Fine Arts, where all the aspects, from painting, sculpture and photography to art history and art theory are smoothly integrated for the student.

Continued on page 37

San Antonio And The Art of Do-it-Yourself Culture

Rigoberto Luna

Vincent Valdez: Yo Soy-ee Blaxican (I Am Blaxican) *2002.*
Pastel on paper, 42x70 in.
© Vincent Valdez

I came up in the Do-It-Yourself culture of grassroots art activation, mobilizing and empowering communities in the San Antonio area through the love of art while overcoming the limitation of available resources. In my late teens and early twenties, I witnessed the birth of humble cultural arts organizations and nontraditional art spaces. I soaked up the teachings of community organizers like Manuel Castillo (San Anto Cultural Arts) and local art icons Alex Rubio (R Gallery, R Space, Rubio Gallery South) and Joe Lopez (Gallista Gallery) in San Antonio's vibrant art scene. In the late 90s, I experienced first hand a surge of new alternative venues exhibiting the works of young and highly motivated artists, including Vincent Valdez, Juan Ramos (San Anto Cultural Arts), and Cruz Ortiz (San Antonio Cultural Arts, Snake Hawk Press).

This was by no means a novel phenomenon for the art community in San Antonio, a city known for repurposing every affordable nook and cranny, warehouse, or home to create studios, creative spaces, or in some cases, galleries. As the saying goes, if opportunity doesn't knock, build a door, and in San Antonio this is a time-honored tradition. This energy produced such institutions as Blue Star Contemporary, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, and Sala Diaz.

DIY spaces have been critical to the development and vibrancy of the San Antonio art scene. This model gives up-and-coming creatives without institutional ties and familial privilege, a chance to gain experience and feel good about building something of their own from the ground up, while providing and learning necessary lessons along the way. Successes and failures are equally educational.

Betting on and investing in one's own vision leads to the building blocks. You develop your artistic taste, what subject matters move you, what artists you're drawn to, and you find out more about yourself, all the while giving yourself access to artists in new ways. It's community building at its core. You get to know the artists in depth and understand

Josie Del Castillo, I Am Fine. It's Just My Anxiety*, 2021.*
Oil and oil paint sticks on panel, 34 x 43 in.
© Josie Del Castillo

their practices, their thinking, and how they like to work. Your audience can directly engage in ways nearly impossible to achieve in larger institutions or museums. These community spaces are people-driven, not art history-driven. By operating this way, a subculture becomes more invested, develops personal and professional networks, and witnesses an artist's career grow. If members of your audience have the means to acquire and collect artwork, they do it at a point when the artists need that support and reassurance the most.

As the city grows and gentrification rears its head, the DIY space has endured. Names and locations may have changed,

Jesse Treviño, La Raspa, *1981.*
Acrylic on canvas, 46 x 66 in., collection of Elaine Dagen and Rick Bela. Courtesy of the artist.
© 1981 Jesse Treviño

and the operations have increasingly become more social media savvy, consistently pushing the model to reflect our times. But the authenticity and energy remain, linked to a community tied to a long history of brash space-makers, from Andy & Yvette Benavides (1906 Studio), to Justin Parr & Ed Saavedra (Flight Gallery), to Sarah Castillo (Lady Base Gallery). These self-reliant spaces have served as incubators for young emerging talent for decades, and have provided opportunities and visibility for lesser-known artists who have otherwise not been given a chance. Much like the bloodline of the Austin music scene is its large number of music venues, artist-run spaces keep the San Antonio art scene fresh and thriving. Due to the continued marginalization of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities in more prominent museums and institutions, these spaces allow for critical conversations and perspectives by a truly diverse array of voices exploring new futures, contemporary societal ideas, and real-time concerns.

In contrast, larger institutions continue to revisit and revamp their commitment to diversity and community engagement due to previous shortcomings and a failure to fully reflect the communities they serve. Audiences and demographics are in a constant state of change, and art institutions, by and large, have not met the challenge of mirroring society.

The impact of seeing artists and narratives that reflect oneself in art spaces is fundamental to uplifting BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities and building a sense of belonging. As a first-generation Mexican American, visiting a museum was a rare occasion for my family. I was eleven years old when we visited the San Antonio Museum of Art to see the landmark exhibition "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries". I was entirely unaware of how important it was to our father, a blue-collar man, to share Mexico's artwork and rich history with his family. Still, it left an indelible mark on my brother, Ruben Luna, an artist himself, and me.

A few years later, my brother and I discovered the work of local artists Jesse Treviño, Cesar Martinez, and Adan Hernandez (El Otro Ojo Gallery). The simple idea that these artists were based in our hometown with names that looked and sounded like ours, made the pursuit of art viable, and allowed us to see ourselves differently, laying the groundwork for new possibilities and creative avenues, because

they created and thrived in San Antonio. Psychologically, seeing these reflections and feelings being represented can drive the cultural shift, and give voice to a group of people that has been largely silenced and devalued. At a highly divisive time in our country, art institutions must maintain the capacity to connect us. They must genuinely see others in order to form a deeper understanding of other perspectives. Growing up in working-class communities while working at art institutions, promoting their core values of inclusivity, diversity, and inclusion, the need for a cultural change and a break from the status quo has grown increasingly evident. Many criticisms—the lack of outreach to communities of color, the disparity in institutional staff, and the gender and racial inequalities in exhibitions and permanent collections—are being addressed, but change is slow. The need for independent spaces of our own, centered on non-white histories or narratives, that offer a more accurate reflection of the city's makeup, all while empowering marginalized voices and creating cross-cultural conversations, is as needed now as it ever was.

In October 2016, my partner and I, interdisciplinary artist and Corpus Christi native, Jenelle Esparza, established our own DIY passion project, Presa House Gallery, inside a 1300 sq. ft home in San Antonio's historic Lavaca District. We were ambitious and unconcerned with the sustainability of the business or financial gain, and we felt some artists weren't getting their fair share of exhibitions, if any at all. Our gallery centered on brown artists, but not exclusively. Many were fresh from art schools across the country, others were completely self-taught. We kicked off by presenting artists in our circle, like Michael Menchaca, Suzy González, and Albert Alvarez. We felt the work, issues, and the narratives of our early exhibitions helped the principal focus of our gallery take shape.

The work wasn't traditional Chicano Art nor was it Eurocentric. Much of it focused on biculturalism, acculturation, identity, and place. It felt timely considering the concurrent political climate in the United States. To us, these artists' voices were as important as any in the country. With Trump newly elected, and the border wall his call to arms, we looked to South Texas to establish relationships with artists in the Coastal Bend and Rio Grande Valley regions. We eventually worked our way around all corners of Texas, and collaborated with established border artists like Cande Aguilar, Gil Rocha, and Jose Villalobos, as well as emerging names like Josie Del Castillo and Alejandro Macias. The bridges and connections built through cross-pollination and engagement with art communities across the state helped us identify similarities in content: fears, concerns, stigmas, traumas, mediums, and the visual lexicons that we share.

Utilizing the lessons we learned from our predecessors, we developed our own methodology in providing regional support to artists of color. Here, artists could experiment and bring in ideas crucial to them without judgment or fear and feel a support that offered genuine understanding. Our strategy wasn't one of resistance but of equity, developing a platform and program that would allow traditionally marginalized artists to succeed within an ecosystem adapted by like-minded creatives of color. Without tokenism or imposter syndrome, the goal was to normalize the regularity with which their narratives and family histories are creatively unpacked and shared.

Our efforts have been effective, garnering the attention of collectors from coast to coast, and the eyes of museum curators throughout our region, by developing and amplifying the complex and diverse perspectives of local and regional Texas talent. My path in the arts, both personally and professionally, was lit and inspired by many. Through the nurturing of our space we strive to maintain and build upon the foundations of those individuals, and make our contribution to the rich tradition of San Antonio DIY spaces with hopes of empowering a future generation of art advocates and space-makers.

Rigoberto Luna is the Co-founder and Director of the Presa House Gallery in San Antonio, TX. He's developed numerous exhibitions focusing on Central and South Texas Latinx artists. Additionally, Luna works at the San Antonio Museum of Art.

San Antonio and its Artists:

THE POLESTARS OF AN UNSTOPPABLE VANGUARD IN AMERICAN ART AND LABOR

Darren Jones

The Texan art ecosystem is on the scale of an independent country. The five largest cities of Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, Fort Worth and Austin-ish have distinctive, gently-competitive art scenes; world-class institutions and collections; and a robust commercial gallery sector centered in Houston and Dallas—with its increasingly well-regarded art fair. There's a constellation of art incubators statewide, from the El Paso Museum of Art to the Galveston Artist Residency. But it's the lupine enigma of San Antonio, on the sunbaked brink of South Texas, with its disposition of tenacity and nonchalance, that cradles one of the most radical art scenes in America.

Of the city's larger institutions, The McNay Art Museum, founded by Marion Koogler McNay, and filled with its namesake's collection of European and American art from the 19th and 20th centuries, was the first museum of modern art in Texas. Its focus on American art after 1970 continues apace with exhibitions and acquisitions of local artists' work. Texas-based, Letitia Huckaby's recently purchased, *Koinonia* (2021) occupies the atrium. The large-scale, wall-mounted installation comprises floral wallpaper, figurative elements and wooden embroidery hoops, noting themes of community, shelter, domestic and female labor, racial injustice, and generational inheritance. Gossamer portraits of young girls are ghostly remembrances of those killed in the 1963, racist bombing of the 16th St Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Their dolorous profiles, in oblong frames, evince a quiet, contemplative timbre. The work is both sepulcher and harbinger; memorial and warning.

The McNay has also just acquired three photographic portraits by Anthony Francis, that reveal exquisitely layered social commentary by the deft presentation of his subjects' clothing, gaze, and positioning. There are observations so nuanced that they barely register their presence, but for those who notice them, the pictures will make a persistent impact. It's there in the upturned hand in *Ma, San Antonio, This and-or That, San Antonio* (2019-20), which is almost the position of an arm when having blood drawn; how much of that have Black women in America had stolen from them?

Six paintings featuring conchas—Mexican sweet bread rolls—by Eva Marengo Sanchez, are also now in the McNay's collection; their cracked, ribbed texture is enhanced by warm orange-pink hues, evocative of the light and geology of this region.

The San Antonio Museum of Art (opened in 1981) occupies what was the Lone Star Brewery complex, and is currently celebrating with "40 Years, 40 Stories: Treasures and New Discoveries from SAMA's Collection." Believing that "artists are the lifeblood of a thriving city" the museum's holdings were recently expanded with acquisitions from nine San Antonio artists. Among them are Joe Harjo, Jenelle Esparza, Jennifer Ling Datchuk and Chris Sauter.

Harjo is a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation of Oklahoma, and works across various media, interlacing tribal lore and culture; white suppression, fetishization, and homogenizing of native people; and the provenance and politics of Americanness as it pertains to race. SAMA bought *The Only Chosen Way: Faith* (2019) a wall-mounted work in the form of a cross comprised of 24 wooden, triangular flag cases. The glass-fronted displays hold Pendleton beach towels, with tribal designs which are folded to the specification of an American flag when it is given to family members of fallen military personnel. Beginning in the late-1800s, Pendleton established trade agreements with several tribes (the Umatilla, Cayuse, Nez Perce, Walla Walla, Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo nations) to make blankets and shawls in native designs. This, unsurprisingly, expanded into clothing, accessories, home furnishings and, for Harjo, reached an absurd, even humorous nadir with beach towels, which he saw in a Vermont store in 2018. This untrammeled commercial grab diminished the relationship between the tribes and Pendleton, devolving into parody and perpetuating base appropriation.

Harjo's *Indian Performance Prints* (2012–) is a series of red, ink footprints of the artist—barefoot and shoed—while he was engaged in mundane activities. Titles include *Indian Checking Facebook, Indian Taking a Shower, Indian Watching Porn,* and *Indian Holding a Weapon: COVID-19 Vaccin*e. It's an effective and wry piercing of the racist misperceptions about what Native Americans might be doing, when in fact they are participating in shared quotidian experience like everyone else.

Jenelle Esparza was born in Corpus Christie and lives in San Antonio. Her work has an archaeological bent, bound to the South Texan landscape where she investigates personal

Joe Harjo: The Only Certain Way: Faith, *2019.*
24 ceremoniously folded Pendleton beach towels, 24 custom memorial flag cases
Photo Credit: Courtesy of the artist

and manufacturing histories, with a focus on the region's cotton fields where her family has generational ties. Esparza utilizes natural and mass-produced found objects—sunken logs, rocks, rusted farming implements—textiles, drawing, and installation; but also labor practices associated with the materials, and husbandry traditions. She learned to weave, has worked with cast-bronze, and has waded deep into cotton fields in Banquete, Texas, to photograph—yes, but also to momentarily arrest the flow of life and connect to her heritage through the tendril whispers of her botanical inspiration. By these modes her body becomes an instrument of echo, action and production; a conduit for the wraiths of back-breaking grind whose stories she keeps alive. Her studio, with its loom and books, reflects these compulsions with an atmosphere of both intellectual curiosity and the thrum of physical industry.

Jennifer Ling Datchuk is of Chinese descent through her mother—if not enough for some when she visits China; and is American, through her father—but not enough for some in this country. She was born in Ohio, raised in Brooklyn, and now lives in San Antonio. Her practice draws on the prejudices, presumptions, and dichotomies of being a first generation Chinese American woman, or "a third culture kid", not least the dehumanizing question often posed to her, "What are you?" Patriarchal dictates, the commercial exploitation of non-white femininity, and the consequences of idealized beauty hierarchies between East and West are also features of the artist's work. She utilizes hair, text, porcelain and fabrics in her sculptures, installations and bodily interventions, infusing them with understated wit. Her ideas on these complicated issues are percolated into a searing aesthetic simplicity, exemplified in *Pluck* (2014) a video wherein the artist removes her eyebrows one by one, as she repeats "he loves me, he loves me not." It is a profound comment on identity, invisibility, perceptions of foreignness, and the pervasiveness of male judgement on female worth.

Chris Sauter's studio is a former church, which is a fitting environment for his investigations into the mysteries and oracular possibilities that have bedeviled and obsessed scientists and ecclesiastics for centuries. Biology, astronomy, ritual and doctrine, are principle subjects for his commentary on our attempts to understand selfhood and universality; the terrestrial and the stellar. *Signal* (2014) is a beautifully pitched example. Rows of prayer candles suffuse a warm glow of spiritual calm, but they are actually blinking out part of a message transmitting data about mankind, sent toward the Messier 13 star system almost fifty years ago, by the recently collapsed Arecibo Telescope in Puerto Rico. The work's tone, its surprise and subtlety, proceeds from a rare caliber of incisive, uncluttered conceptualism of which Sauter is a master.

Another of the city's hubs, Artpace was founded by collector and philanthropist Linda Pace (1945-2007) and is one of the country's most sought after and generously-funded curatorial and artistic residencies. Each year there are three cycles, when an invited curator selects a Texan, a national, and an international artist for two month stays that culminate in solo exhibitions. That focus strikes a rare geographic equity that has elevated the careers of state artists, while fostering global exchange. The first round of artists in 1995 consisted of Annette Messager (France), Felix Gonzalez-Torres (New York), and San Antonio artist, Jesse Amado. Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa (Guatemala), Dan Herschlein (New York), and Shana Hoehn (Texarkana) comprise the most recent trio. A soaring vinyl-text register of past recipients fills a wall two stories high, and makes for an electrifying—and emotional—read through a quarter century of Artpace luminaries.

Pace's support of artists has made her a titanic figure in San Antonio, and this is most keenly felt at Ruby City, the stunning art center that is home to the Linda Pace Foundation which houses, exhibits and loans her collection. Here, famous stalwarts are placed in dialog with San Antonio artists. Ruby City's Director, Elyse A. Gonzales notes: "we're in an enviable position in that we are deeply embedded in our local/regional community but also a presence in the larger national and international art worlds. That's a very exciting aspect of our collection". This axis is exemplified in the current exhibition "Waking Dreams" which displays works by Christian Marclay, Joyce. J. Scott, and Marina Abramović among others, alongside Ana Fernandez, Ethel Shipton, Cruz Ortiz and Chuck Ramirez.

San Antonio is home to many more contemporary art and arts organizations, often founded by artists, for artists. They include Cinnabar Gallery; Blue Star Contemporary, a complex of four galleries—San Antonio staple, Flight Gallery is there—artist studios, off-site community spaces, and an international residency that sends four San Antonio area artists to Künstlerhaus Bethanien, in Berlin, for three month stints, each year; the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, a supporter and amplifier of Chicano, Chicana and Latinx art for almost forty years; and Sala Diaz, with its Casa Chuck Residency program, founded by Alejandro Diaz in 1995. Its archives were recently acquired by the University of Texas San Antonio. Instituto Cultural de México, is the Mexican Government's cultural initiative in San Antonio. Recently the institute hosted "Plastic Humanity" (2021) as part of the Luminaria Contemporary Arts Festival, an installation and performance by Nain Leon. He creates digital vignettes, NFTs, photographs, and video, elucidating themes such as environmental catastrophe, the visual sewage and nuclear-egotism of social media, and the irony of computer living that has simultaneously connected and isolated us. At the Mexican Cultural Institute, Leon constructed a tsunami made of single-use water bottles, suspended in stasis just before breaking onto a beach which is littered with garbage. Below the deluge, white-masked performers sunbathe and pose gormlessly, obsessively checking their phones and taking gelfies (glamor-shots), oblivious to the destruction

wrought around them. The work's efficacy is felt when kicking through the incongruous mix of plastic and sand, with the discomfiting knowledge that the refuse Leon has collected is a drop in the ocean of the damage that we're doing.

Presa House Gallery, was founded by cultural entrepreneurs Rigoberto Luna and Jenelle Esparza. Currently celebrating its fifth year, it has become an extraordinary success as an agitator and elevator of Latinx art, partly due to an expansive network the gallery has forged with art scenes and artists throughout San Antonio's sphere of influence and beyond, extending as far south as the Rio Grande Valley and Mexico, across Texas, the Southwest, and nationally. A recent exhibition, "Benjamin Muñoz: Rattled Bones", presented spellbinding monochrome woodcuts featuring towering cornucopias of text and objects relating to the artist's Mexican heritage and his role as a parent. A newspaper dispenser, a surveillance camera, business signage, skeletal features and calaveras, florals, brand name consumerist products, idioms and delineated background landscapes are among the strata of Muñoz' visual lexicon.

In December 2021, the gallery presented "South of the Checkpoint / North of the River" which highlighted three artists engaged with the fractures, confluences, identities and romance of the Borderlands; Rigoberto A. González, born in Reynosa Tamaulipas, Mexico, and based in Edinburg, TX; Gina Gwen Palacios, born in Taft, TX, and based in Brownsville; and Donald Jerry Lyles Jr., who was born in and lives in Edinburg. All three artists teach at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

San Antonio has annual and mobile initiatives including the aforementioned Luminaria Contemporary Arts Festival, this year's Texas Biennial, which several city venues are hosting, and Contemporary Art Month, which takes place each March as a celebration of San Antonio's art scene and artists.

José Villalobos is increasingly prominent in San Antonio and nationally, and is among the most valorous and arresting artists of his generation. He was raised in El Paso on the US-Mexico border in a conservative, Evangelical Christian home, and was subject to the homophobic mores and contradictions of society generally, and Norteño culture specifically. For example, while the flamboyant stage attire that revered Norteño musicians would wear on television or stage was an accepted part of their art, someone wearing the same clothing on the street would likely elicit homophobic abuse and degradation. Meeting, rejecting and reconciling aspects of such sociological and religious schisms underpins Villalobos' practice which incorporates installation, performance and sculptural objects.

The artist intercepts the oppressive connotations of Western and Mexican acute-masculinity (drag in and of itself) and remilitarizes them in the aesthetics of sovereign-queerdom such as a bejewelled silver saddle; cowboy hats adorned with tassels and sequins; and a phantom steed, traced in the

José Villalobos and Nina Padilla: Nina X José*, 2021. Photo: Nina Padilla at Vignette Portrait Photography*

air by a horse pack and burdened with luggage—an equine standard-bearer carrying the Pride Flag. Text is also employed to skewer the violence in vernacular slurs, exemplified in Villolobos' 2019 exhibition "Joto Fronterizo | Border Faggot" (Freedman Gallery, Albright College, PA), and in "De la Misma Piel" (2016, Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center), which included belts carved with 'sodomita', 'maricón' or 'jotito'. With transcendent and poetic grandeur, there are heraldic, ceramic wings, shown in "Fragmentos y Suturas", (2019, South Texas College, McAllen), fired and stained to look like stitched leather—the ascension of a resplendent gay phoenix on the farthest edges of Texas.

Also tightening the straps on cultural persecution, is Louisiana-born, Heyd Fontenot, a long-time Texas-based artist now living in San Antonio. His work is often concerned with the moralizing hypocrisy of organized religion, and how it's used to vilify queer people. His 2018 multi-media inhabited-installation, "The Temptation of Saint Reborlaro" (titled after charlatan televangelist, Oral Roberts—spelled backwards) was exhibited at Living Arts, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Fontenot's sensitivity to the complexities of fear and psychological harm lend his work equilibrium between the compulsion to unnerve religious aggressors and offer succor to those traumatized by their doctrinal shaming.

That project in particular touches on the kind of depravities of man that are so severe they can corrupt the very atmos-

Gabi Magaly: Yo No Naci Para Aguantar A Nadie*, 2020.*
Archival Pigment Print
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

phere of a place, almost leaving an invisible rip in nature. Roberts' City of Faith Hospital and Oral Roberts University complex, just outside Tulsa, is just such an unnatural vortex. The air of this pantheon to Defcon 1 egotism reeks of the wickedness, lies and fraud that built it. The impact that Roberts' demonizing has had on the suicides, killings and abuse of gay people in America and globally, cannot be understated. Happily, Roberts is no longer with us, having returned to sit for eternity at the side of his beloved maker—and he's not in Heaven. But the stench of his presence remains. Today, his university is one of the most LGBTQIA+-phobic universities in America. The website states that: 'At ORU, we pledge not to engage in or attempt to engage in any illicit, or unscriptural sexual acts, which includes any homosexual activity...'. Intriguingly, "unscriptural" can be anagrammatized to read "lunatics purr".

Talking of, there are other bearers of Roberts' baleful torch, which makes frontline cultural warriors of Fontenot's ability, essential. There is moral bankruptcy defined—formerly known as mewling bigot, Jerry Falwell Jr; feral, porcine "pastor" Donnie Romero, who praised the Pulse gay nightclub massacre, in Orlando, and wished the body count had been higher; and the crepuscular, Marion "Pat" Robertson, an oxygen-thieving zealot who, despite appearing deader than Grandpa Sawyer in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, still wheezes through his duties as a host of the Christian Broadcasting Network's "700 Club".

Fontenot is a nimble thinker; he clothes his anger and mockery of religious extremism in just enough whimsy—bunting, animals, song, costumes, ritualistic props, film, performance, and playful nude drawings of Renaissance opulence à la Botticelli—lest this most genial of artists seem unwelcoming or morose, despite the suffering he seeks to assuage. But his commitment to countering biblical terrorism, is deadly serious. Incidentally, Robertson said of this writer's birth country, "Homosexuals are riding high in the media ... And in Scotland, you can't believe how strong the homosexuals are." agus na dìochuimhnich e!

The gendered demands placed on Gabi Magaly during her Mexican-American upbringing are the font of her photographically-oriented practice, which she describes unflinchingly: "My childhood was saturated with the machismo and marianismo culture. Hypermasculinity oozes brutality, control, and bad cologne. Placated and tongue-biting women don't speak up, act up, and always have rice and tortillas on the table at precisely six o'clock. Daughters are raised to submit to men, are being taught to fetishize purity and holiness. We are expected to feed stomachs, ego, and a taste for violence."

But this was not for Magaly. Her subverting of her predesti-

ny, and the emancipation she has gained are hard-won yet ever under threat from the stubborn bedrock of established societal roles. It's a circumstance made more difficult by recent anti-women laws in Texas (and elsewhere) that had the backing of the state's maniacal governor. Art is the vehicle that she rams into the patriarchal edifice that would otherwise have consumed her. While her father evinced the traditions of female compliance—deference, domesticity, childbearing—her mother cautioned her to attain autonomy and self-fulfillment. Magaly is an invigorating cultural mutineer, bracing and unrepentant in her determination to break bonds not just for herself, but for other women. Yet her emotional intelligence lends her the self-awareness to incorporate inevitable moments of reflection, exhaustion and doubt. That acknowledgment of vulnerability strengthens the work, and provides further relatability to those who have experienced what she is voicing. She utilizes photography, homely items of feminine labor, embroidery, text and installation. Whether pastel-pretty greetings cards with alternative messaging—"Por favor hija, no seas pendeja" (please daughter, don't be dumb); a prayer to Saint Monica that Magaly has amended, switching a woman's hope for strength to bear her husband's infidelity, for a promise to divorce him; intimate photographs taken with her partner during or after scorching arguments; or a delicate, floral doily embroidered with a clitoris; Magaly torpedoes the wholesomeness and submission demanded by generational and familial rites, returns the viewer's gaze with interest, and hands the patriarchy's shrunken balls back to it on a silver platter.

Female form and its politicization—what it is to be, and to be in possession of one's identity as a woman—are also fundamental to Joey Fauerso, who is known for her large-scale, black and white works that both highlight and dissolve distinctions between abstraction and figuration, organic and geometric, nature and manufacture. More personally, she incorporates what it is to be a mother *and* a creative worker, to be at home *and* in the studio. Fauerso combines sculpture, drawing and performance, not only collapsing their definitions—sometimes literally—but so intrinsically that they become one harmonious action. This almost simultaneous construction and disassembly is a flux noted by Fauerso when she writes that: "I read somewhere that a spider sometimes eats her web to replenish her supply of silk."

In Thomas Harris' book *Red Dragon*, the serial killer, Francis Dolarhyde consumes William Blake's watercolor, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*. This is too dark a reference to apply to Fauerso's interests or oeuvre, but that sense of constant transformation, of quickening and vanishing, and of rebirth are intrinsic to her process. There is also keen and delightful wit. A video piece titled *The Clearing* (2010) is set in an arcadian, woodland glade, rendered in watery greens and browns. Flights of birds sail overhead, and a flautist—the artist—Pied Piper-like, serenades us. It is souped-up Thomas Kinkade, if his pastoral world-building were animated. That is, until a young, naked man dances on-screen, gawps around in wonderment, spinning, toppling, and falling, before getting up and sauntering off into the trees. You won't see that in one of those twee Jacquie Lawson video ecards that well-meaning relatives oblige you to spend interminable minutes watching.

Fernando Andrade was born in Acuña Coahuila, and moved to the United States when he was seven. Now based in San Antonio, his consummate drawings of gnarled sticks from his series *Palos y Piedras* (sticks and stones) (2013/14) and *God Bless America (*2015*)*, recall the childhood war games he'd play with his friends and cousins growing up in Mexico, using rocks as grenades and sticks as guns. The drawings carry subtly debossed text advertisements from firearms magazines. Today youngsters where Andrade was raised use real firearms, given to them by cartels to carry out crimes, for which the courts will treat them more leniently if they are caught. Andrade draws a single wooden "gun" on the page, focusing the viewer's attention on the sinuous, natural lines, and similarity to real weaponry.

The works ruminate on the consequences of abducted freedoms, and the language and ammunitions of pretend and actual violence, intensified by the immensely accomplished draughtsmanship and restrained compositions. For all the rudimentariness of Andrade's long-ago wooden pistols, his drawings of them have the futuristic cool of science-fiction weapons by H. R. Giger, or the Gristle Gun in David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ*, reminding us that innocence is always at risk of being superseded by the warped fantasies, cynicism and greed of adulthood.

Also committed to familial history, Ruben Luna constructs portable cases containing artifacts and ritual objects of familial love and caring, each one dedicated to a relative. His emotionally charged collections are intended as a celebration and archiving of blood and genealogical bonds. In *Portrait of My Abuelita (Grandmother)* (2021) a red interior is moulded to fit various items, including a broom used by Luna's grandmother during "Limpia", a spiritual cleansing wherein Luna would lay down, and she would sweep negative energy from his body. There is also a can of 7-UP, for upset stomachs, and VapoRub, applied for minor ailments.

The collections can be considered sacraments, at once specific to Luna's lineage, yet transferable to viewers who fondly remember family traditions in their own pasts. At Luna's studio, this writer, recalled his grandmother's liberal application of Scotch for any infirmity, albeit with dubious scientific reasoning—a common treatment in working-class Scotland that possibly created a host of eight-year-old alcoholics.

San Antonio may not spring to mind as a conductor for contemporary art, and it does lack a collector base that would support more commercial galleries—although Ruiz-Healy Art, focusing on Latinx, Latin American and Texan artists

(and with a space on New York's Upper East Side) is a very impressive exception. San Antonio's scene has a rangy feel, and if it lopes around the periphery of the American contemporary art world, often unnoticed, and perhaps even licking its lips at the kills of its brasher neighbors, Dallas and Houston—it seems unhurried to join the fray. It can live with some hunger because there is a placeness here that gives a sense of self-possession.

San Antonio's artists are its scene, with Nate Cassie, Raul Rene Gonzalez, Hiromi Stringer, Sarah Fox, and Angelica Raquel among many who warrant further attention. The synthesis between artists and civic and art institutions is a pillar of the city's creative momentum. Many artists work in, or have shown in city museums, and are involved in the substantial practice of collaboration and artist-run spaces which underpin organizational sensibilities. While there are hierarchies in any network, there is a conviviality among curators, artists, directors, writers, board members, dealers, and teachers, which plays out informally during fire-pit conversations at exhibition openings, off-peak gallery visits, or mid-week installs. There's an unpretentious, homey localism, yet it is the seventh largest city in America and has attained due international kudos through lean and agile cultural exchange programs like Artpace. There is a stable cadre of local artists, but there are always incoming voices, so that everyone knows almost everyone, preventing stagnation.

There is something else that secures San Antonio's authenticity. Location can ignite, or deaden art's effect. When art that is about a place—the stories, myths, traumas, politics and hopes of particular landscapes, and when it is seen, mulled and discussed there, where the seams of human experience have settled, art can reach its fullest realization.

Seeing these artists' work, in the environments that informed it, under the cultural storms that affect it, and traveling through terrain, beneath the skies and vistas, from which it still grows, brings contextual understanding of its origins and social urgency. It is not something that an audience can experience taking the L train from Brooklyn to Chelsea, to see the work, strong as it is, but transplanted from the soil that nourished it, to a bland, white gallery. In liberal bastions like New York where so much has been achieved, so many battles won, all artistic discourse is embraced. Audiences are so well-versed and accepting that their is little friction with art's messaging. The majority of cosmopolitan populations in most major art centers are in political agreement with what an artist may be saying. As vital—and so far unresolved—as it is for regional and marginalized artists to be included in the greatest American museums, and to be seen internationally, it is also incumbent on audiences who really want to know the roots of an artist's reasoning to come and see the work where it originates.

When Jenelle Esparza explores the cotton fields of her forbearers' toil; Gabi Magaly returns to her grandmother's home in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, after an absence of fourteen years, to recover the value of her kindred history; José Villalobos assails the prejudices of his upbringing; when Heyd Fontenot reflects the murderous antics of religious criminals upon congregants' faces; or when Fernando Andrade reaches into his past, to draw the machinery of future violence; they are doing so fully immersed in what has been lived, what is fading, or yet needs to be challenged. Such qualities place these artists and their peers in South Texas and elsewhere in the state, at the forefront of artistic activism in America.

Each of their voices, histories and geographies—literal and cultural—have joined within their practices, in an equation of supple artistry. They are insisting on the eminence of subjects in a state—a country—whose populations and governance may not want to hear them, and are often politically and religiously averse to evolution and inclusivity or to losing their grip on power. This is what moves these artists' work beyond art-making, and into creative munition—motives for change where it most needs to happen.

In San Antonio, throughout South Texas and along the border, artists are working in the most fraught and abused arena in America, the scene of brutalities, and inhumanities that stain the hands of craven politicians on both ends of the ideological spectrum, by their use of the border as a political tool, where before, there was uninterrupted life and nature. In an endless cultural seiche, these landscapes have been Mexico, Texas and the United States (wherever today's borders may lie) with America often playing the fumbling, prickly role in an uncommon threesome prone to furtive spurts of dissatisfying intervention.

There was never a single frontier (as Hollywood's ridiculous prejudices would have us believe), but many—there still are. These are the crucibles where art has the most work to do, to engage (or enrage) audiences, and when artists commit to these locations they form a potent, networked discourse. San Antonio and South Texas are a center of contemporary art production made vital by the stresses and legacies of the region's roiling sociological fault-lines. It is the artists working here, who are keeping their balance and focus among these buckling tectonic uncertainties and progressing despite them, that are among the most significant critical voices in American art.

Darren Jones is a Scottish-American art critic. He is the US editor-at-large for New Art Examiner, and a frequent contributor to Artforum. He is the recipient of an Andy Warhol/Creative Capital Arts Writers Grant. Darren teaches Curatorial Practice at the Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore.

In The Distance

A CURATOR'S EXPERIENCE OF SOUTH TEXAS AND THE BORDER

Leslie Moody Castro

I talk about the state of Texas all the time. It has become near-mythical for its stereotypes (justified or otherwise), complicated history, right-leaning politics, and its staggering geographic scale. I am from Texas. I was born in Edinburg on the border with Mexico, and raised in Austin. My family still lives in the small town of San Benito in the southernmost region of the border area. My experiences have always traversed these two distinct places, two cultures, each with their own characters and identities. That fluidity was part of daily life growing up during the eighties and nineties, as my family and I flitted back and forth during seven-hour drives along Texas highways. Things seemed so much further away then (or perhaps that was just the 50 mile speed limit) but even today, despite GPS and cell phones, that drive still stretches unimaginably far. I have to remind myself that I am not just traveling to the edge of a state, but to the edge of a country, the beginning of a new one, and a vast expanse that contains all of the complications that national distinctions and similarities imply.

The Texan landscape is diverse, and the Sun's light falls on it with such varying intensity that it creates different worlds across Texas' quarter of a million square miles. Here, geography is defined by proximity between towns and cities, and the cardinal direction isn't always what it seems; the Panhandle is not north, but west; San Antonio is not central, but south; the border region that stretches almost 200 miles is neither—it's the border. It's a cultural language unique to us Texans. I have spent much of my life traversing the IH-35 corridor, the highway that runs north-south, bisects Austin, and connects to San Antonio 80 miles away, where a ribbon of highway systems extends across the state. The drive remains a kind of pilgrimage, but my relationship to the border and the geographies south of Austin has shifted significantly as my professional interests have evolved.

I am an independent curator and writer with a specific focus on Texas and Mexico. I relocated to Mexico City a decade ago and have spent the years since passing back and forth across the border as various creative projects have required. Driving such incredible distances requires commitment, but to travel by any other mode would be to miss the nuances of each community, town or rural locale that inform creative industry. The pace and perspective of driving also provide a way to disconnect, to think, and to prepare for the cultural shifts that are inevitable in a landscape of such profound and disparate histories. Living in Mexico City has also increased my awareness of societal difference within Mexico: For example, Matamoros—the city across the border from Brownsville—could not be more distinct from the capital. The accent is different, the food and climate are different, even the Spanish dialect is different.

Studio time with Gil Rocha
Courtesy of Leslie Moody Castro

In the 277 miles between San Antonio and Brownsville, the vistas flatten into endless horizons which contrast with the greens and browns in the crop-rows lining the highway, where vendors sell fresh Rio Grande Valley citrus fruits, and ceramics. It is here, between the South Texas of San

Border Wall, Lower Rio Grande Valley
Courtesy of Leslie Moody Castro

Antonio, and the South Texas of the border, that the state cleaves to embody two identities, two countries. Except, there was never a distinction until the politics and corruption of men intervened, emphasizing difference, and undermining shared experience. And yet there is convergence too: the concept of place is porous, multilayered; it's a unique region at once specific, rooted in the story of the land, but also amorphous, neither here nor there. This enigmatic terrain stretches west, nearly 300 miles from Brownsville to El Paso.

The Valley itself is a large swath of land divided into two parts. In the Upper Valley, the cities of McAllen and Edinburg have experienced significant growth—partially due to new highway infrastructure, but also due to drug-related violence that has escalated since the aughts, in Reynosa, and along the Mexican side of the border. In the Lower Valley, the city of Brownsville has undergone similar developments and migration to the U.S from Mexico.

And of course, the constant presence of the border wall separates communities and people, literally, emotionally—in every way, even though traffic back and forth never stops. It looms over the landscape, coming into view, and receding out of peripheral vision, slicing through backyards. Impossible to ignore, it is the subject of many artists' practices, exemplified by Tere Garcia who used the border wall in her work *Anti-Monument* (2020) a series of Lumen prints woven through the rails of the wall and exposed directly to the Sun. But the border's metallic hulk—with its devastating implications—is also normalized by familiarity and exhaustion; it's a strange, silent monument to division.

These themes of cultural connection, dissonance and distinction are palpable, and they are mirrored in the region's creative communities which each have their own perspectives, approaches, and artistic constituencies while also collaborating in shared knowledge and circumstance. Commercial gallery spaces tend to come and go, often because of a lack of collectors, in art scenes that operate largely through a social-practice lens—most recently Galeria 409, run by Mark Clark. The Brownsville Museum of Fine Art carries a torch for local contemporary artists, and welcomes practioners and visitors in the southern region of the state. It is a nexus for community-centered, educational activities. The museum is part of a longer-term cultural development, situated along a walking path in a public park, that features a sculpture garden. On the other side of the Rio Grande River (or the Río Bravo if you're from Mexico), the Museo de Arte

Studio visit with Josuè Ramírez
Courtesy of Leslie Moody Castro

Contemporáneo de Tamaulipas (MACT) overlooks the border. It's a central feature in a park built by the Mexican government in the 1960s to create a sensation of longing, and to encourage a desire to belong. The MACT was designed by acclaimed Mexican architect Mario Paní, and has exhibited an impressive collection of modernist and contemporary art by internationally renowned Mexican artists including Eugenia Belden, Magali Lara, José Luis Cuevas, Ismael Vargas, Betsabeé Romero, and Federico Silva.

Aside from institutions, many gallery spaces are associated with the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley system, which stretches between Brownsville and Edinburg. In Brownsville, the Rusteberg Art Gallery is a resource for both students and artists. In Edinburg, the Visual Arts Gallery serves a similar function as a space for invited artists to exhibit in, as well as a venue for BFA and MFA thesis shows. In nearby McAllen—the larger of the two cities—is the International Museum of Art and Science (IMAS) which hosts exhibitions from both fields in one building, as well as providing educational opportunities.

Almost three hours, and 150 miles northwest of McAllen, the city of Laredo is host to one of the largest border crossings in the country. Laredo's art community has an identity distinct from the Rio Grande Valley, one that leans toward the rest of the state and less to its border city counterpart, Nuevo Laredo, because of decades of intensifying drug-war-related bloodshed. Only about four hours from San Antonio, Laredo is also less removed geographically, and has historical connectivity because of the freight train system that extended from Corpus Christi and San Antonio during the 1880s. The Laredo Center for the Arts is the main exhibition space, and the core of the contemporary art scene. It recently presented "En Mi Casa" by César A. Martínez, a leading figure in the establishment and development of Chicano art and activism since the 1970s.

Housed in the historic City Hall and directed by Rosie Santos, a young and energetic arts administrator, the center is only a few blocks from the international bridge crossing. Santos herself is part of a generation of highly motivated artists including Gil Rocha, Jorge Lopez, and Poncho Santos, who is also the organizer behind MUSA Alternative Art Space, which hosts experimental, site-specific exhibitions and community workshops. Laredo is home to a modest but dynamic art scene whose members support each other in building connections and opportunities within the city and beyond.

Contemporary art initiatives in all of the border towns have evolved, as artists have come and gone—some leaving to seek exhibition opportunities elsewhere, others staying to invest their cultural capital—and as art spaces have made their marks, and closed. However, solid networks remain. In the Rio Grande Valley, artists such as Cande Aguilar, Paul Valadez, Brian Wedgworth and Aleida Garcia Wedgworth maintain links to mentorship and leadership for younger generations. Josuè Ramírez (Rawmirez), Josie del Castillo, and Veronica Gaona, together with their peers, colleagues and cohorts have expanded the visibility of artists in their border region, gaining the respect that their commitment and work deserve.

In acknowledging and building upon the paths—literal and figurative—formed by previous art workers, today's creative minds along the border are continuing a vital and under-appreciated legacy, while heightening the arc of cultural production in South Texas. As the valley region continues to attract critical interest from within the state and further afield, the work of its dedicated artists will continue to travel along those endless highways, both physical and digital. In doing so, their imperative commentary will be presented, and made increasingly visible, to a national art superstructure that has been unseeing for too long.

Leslie Moody Castro is an independent curator and writer based in Mexico City and Texas, where she has produced and organized projects for more than a decade. Her practice relies on itinerancy and collaboration, while the range of her critical writing and exhibitions illustrate her commitment to concepts of place. In addition to the belief that the visual arts can create moments of empathy, Moody Castro also believes that mariachis make everything better.

The San Antonio Aesthetic

Neil Fauerso

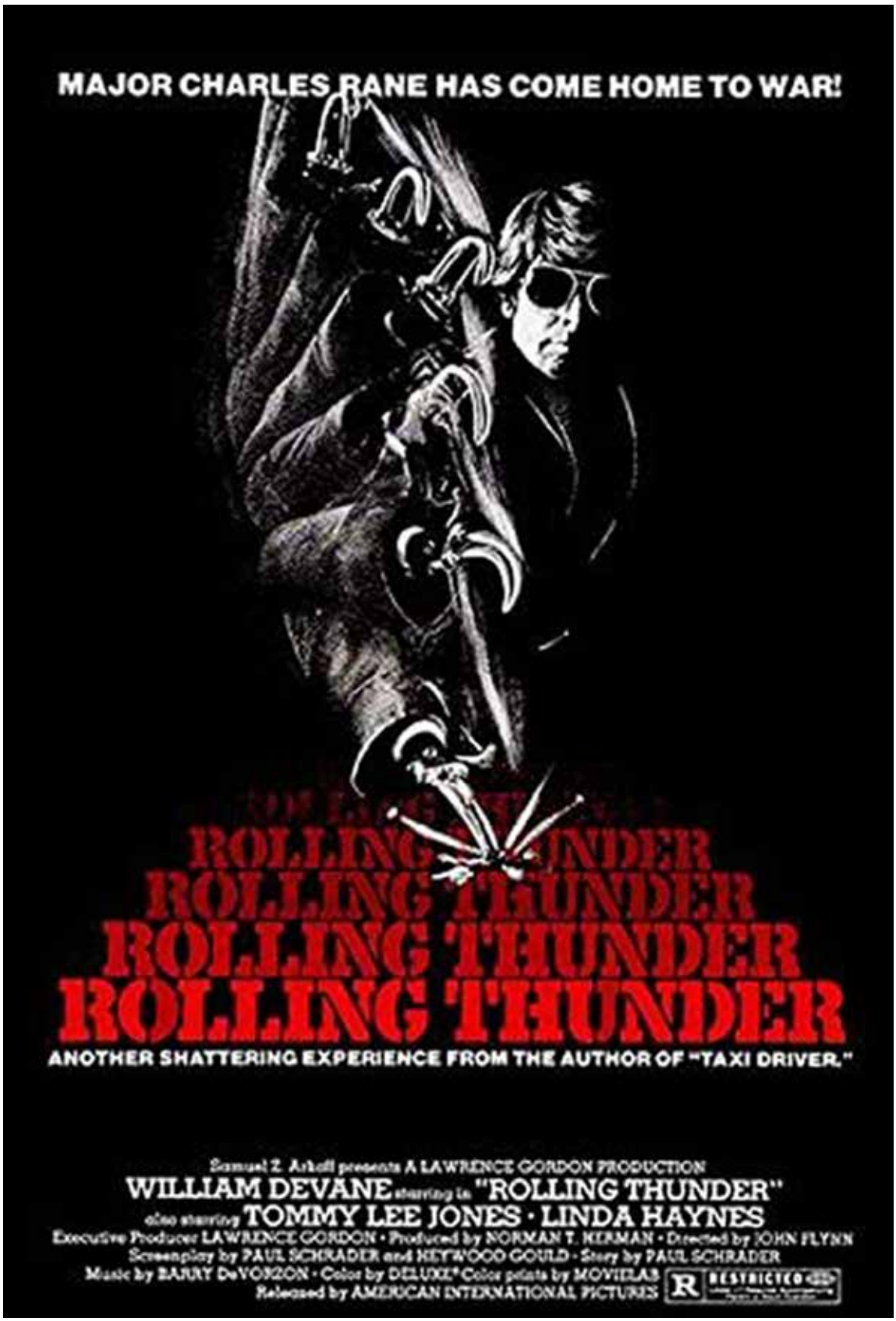
The Getaway (1972), *directed by Sam Peckinpah*

Photo: Wiki Commons

San Antonio occupies an unusual cultural position. Technically the seventh largest city in the U.S. (due to its Lichtenstein-sized city limits), it nevertheless is usually associated with provincial mid-tiered cities derided for their prosaic bleakness—Kansas City, Cleveland, Buffalo, Sacramento, et al. When San Antonio's NBA team, the Spurs, were routine title contenders, TNT's Charles Barkley would relish roasting the city in his chortling southern drawl ("there's some biiig people in San Antonio...."). I recently saw a stand-up comedian from New York and braced for the usual invective—that this is a fat, poor, ugly city and why on earth would anyone want to live here?

However, San Antonio also exists as a frontier totem of mythic shadow. Mark Twain once said: "There are only four unique cities in the United States: New Orleans, San Antonio, Boston, and San Francisco." I've always interpreted that to mean that those cities had a unique geographical character, but more importantly, a personality that was intrinsically American, differentiating themselves from capitals of industry and commerce like New York and Chicago which were closer to iterations of European cities. With San Antonio, that personality is perhaps the primary, legendary gateway to the west, sanctified by a tale of martyred frontiers—the Alamo.

Though the battle at the small mission was actually a foolishly doomed stand in defense of preserving slavery, its symbol, until recently, was like one of those American hieroglyphs—James Dean's popped collar, Marilyn Monroe's billowing dress—that beguile the globe. This was especially pronounced for the boomer generation whose adolescence



Rolling Thunder *(1977), directed by John Flynn*

Photo: Wiki Commons

was spent in the thrall of the candy-glazed sound stage of Disney's manifest destiny westerns. Phil Collins, born in England in 1951, was so taken (or perhaps haunted) by the Alamo story that he later came to believe he was a reincarnation of the last man to leave the Alamo. Subsequently, he spent tens of millions of dollars acquiring (possibly fake) relics from the Alamo, to be donated to a planned right-wing hagiography museum lusted after by Texas' Dockers-wearing, suburban, reactionary, state government officials.

The current configuration of the Alamo, an underwhelming mission church (the missions along the San Antonio River are far more beautiful), is surrounded by tourist dross—wax museums, taffy, t-shirts and keychain shops. It seems to exist in a strange simulacra of a film set (or let's be honest, a tv set for something along the line of Walker, Texas Ranger) or a place where a wanted fugitive is apprehended in a candid camera-like sting. To be frank, it sucks. You take friends there for the joke that it sucks. This is an essential quality of San Antonio. Twenty or so years ago, stickers proclaiming "Keep Austin Weird" (an effort that was wholly unsuccessful unless the current sci-fi dystopia of tent cities and million-dollar condos is "weird") became popular and the joking reply from San Antonio were stickers that read "Keep San Antonio Lame".

This lameness forms the piquant essence of San Antonio's aesthetic character. It is a lameness with legacy, real history. A lameness with an edge, an élan. In the sprawling boulevards of auto shops, taquerias and strip malls with their Mad Libs assortment of businesses (Supplements, Martial Arts Studio, a store called "Grim Dark Games" that has a topographical board to play Warhammer 40k, the largely inscrutable game involving futuristic dwarf figurines), I see the living, urban, abstract art of the graffiti and paint jobs that Dennis Hopper catalogued with his polaroid series of LA graffiti, and its erasure by city crews. This experience reminded Hopper "that art is everywhere in every corner that you choose to frame and not just ignore and walk by."

San Antonio made me appreciate this perspective more so than anywhere else I've lived. Residing in a relatively serene city—the traffic's not too bad, neither are the rents—allows a certain settling of the senses and the acuity that follows. The music critic Kyle Gann once recounted leaving a John Cage concert irritated and dissatisfied by what he initially judged as an assortment of banal squawks from everyday objects, and then walked onto the street and heard a symphony. The Cage composition was like a procedure to remove cotton stuffing from one's ears. In trying to see and listen to this city, I feel a similar expansive frisson, the sound of a cork being pulled out of a bottle of champagne. And it is in this state that the lameness of the city reveals itself more as a strangeness.

This city, with a reputation for being 'sweet' and a 'great place to raise kids' is also deeply gothic in the most recent cultural sense—in love with dark metal, The Smiths, Halloween, haunted spots around town, Dia de los Muertos and oferendas. The city that produced Christopher Cross and his glass blown fantasy of middle-class luxury escape 'Sailing' also oozed out the Butthole Surfer's deranged rumination of the same 'Sea Ferring'. This is not contrast so much as a wholeness—as if constellations in the night sky were pin pricks in the curved ceiling of a dome.

My two favorite movies filmed in San Antonio—1972's *The Getaway* and 1977's *Rolling Thunder*—embody this sea-sawing totality. In both films, the protagonists return to San Antonio after stints in prison and a Vietnamese POW camp respectively, and squint dazed in the unvarnished sunlight of the flats. The bucolic scenes—a river cruise, the endless congregations of afternoon shadows in an unspooling ranch home—are tinged with an approaching chime, the blast of a mariachi trumpet. When things break bad there's something cheerful or at least festive about these films' turns—as if the 'set' of San Antonio got the party it was prepared and decorated for.

An artistic aesthetic of a place is usually more correctly thought of as a state of mind. The aesthetic of say, late 1960s and early 1970s Los Angeles, of John Baldessari and David Hockney, froze the frame of Antonioni-existentialism and lacquered it with a wry shrug, toss, and splash. Harry Dean Stanton saying "I am nothing, you are nothing" in a mysteriously reassuring tone.

Let's take the art of a few interesting contemporary San Antonio artists: Jennifer Ling Datchuk, Jimmy James Canales, Chris Sauter, Cruz Ortiz, Carmen Cartiness Johnson, James Smolleck, and Jenelle Esparza. There isn't a visual current among them, but rather one of relaxed stoicism. This is the beat between lameness and strangeness, the pause in heat when a cloud passes over the sun, the time it takes to speak of a past misfortune and laugh.

Philip Larkin ends his poem "Aubade"—which despairingly ruminates on the static, white noise inevitability of death—with the line: "Postmen, like doctors, go from house to house." Larkin lived in similarly provincial Yorkshire, England, and took such psychic purgatory with an old-world European melancholy. Eric Homberger describes him as "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket". Here, we're a little bit more sanguine about all this sprawl and would not cast such a pall on an approaching visitor. They might be a friend, holding a brightly dyed egg filled with confetti, ready to cheerfully break it on your head.

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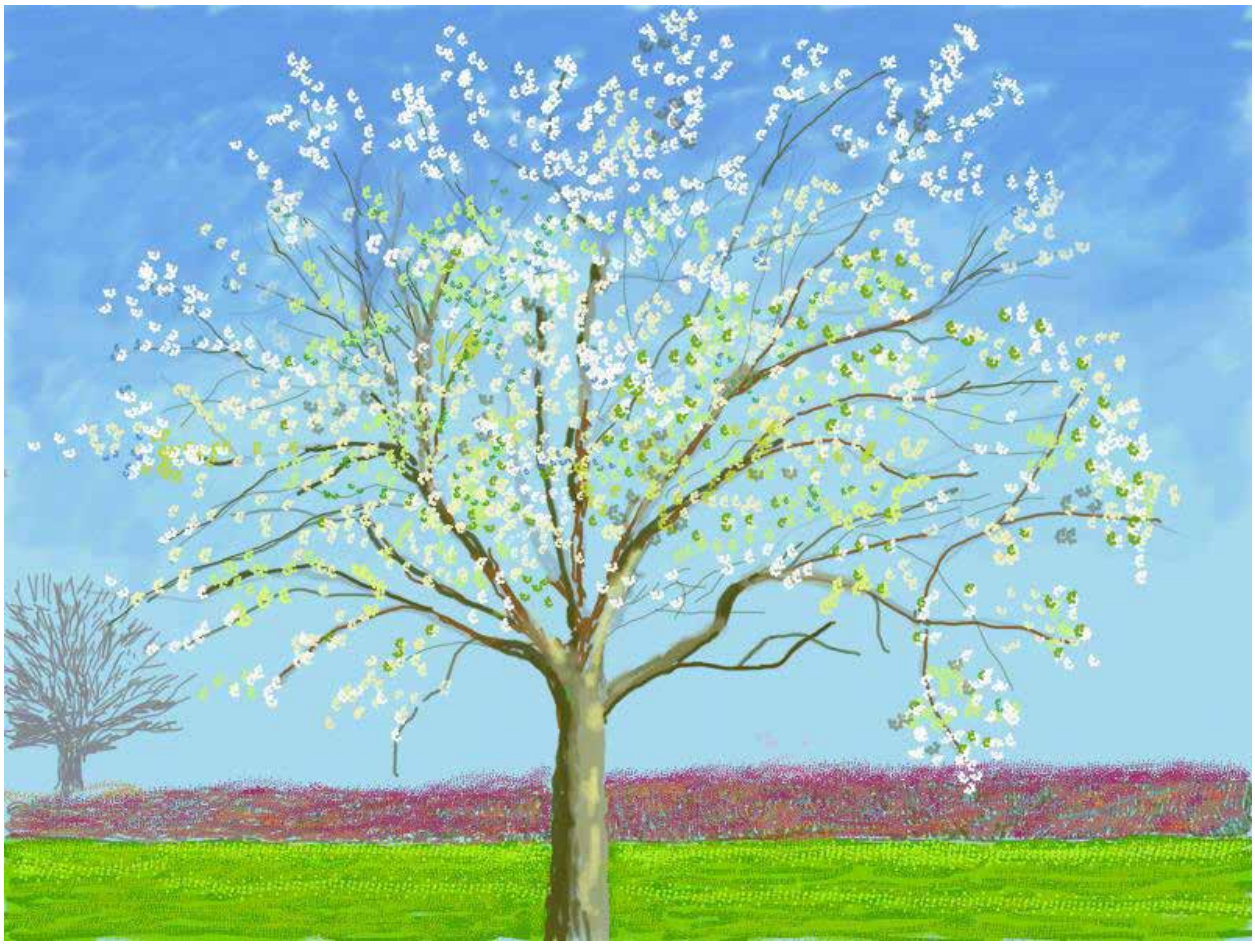
Enterprises of Great Pith and Moment

DAVID HOCKNEY AT BOZAR, BRUSSELS

Sam Vangheluwe



No. 133, 23rd March 2020, *IPad painting*
© David Hockney

It has been nearly 30 years since the last solo exhibition by David Hockney at BOZAR. That, by any reckoning, is a generation. Many Belgians born in 1992 have by now begotten offspring. Last Saturday, it seemed as if they were all present at BOZAR, with their extended families.

For those who need someone to hold their hand, there are Lunch Tours (sold out) and Interactive Guided Tours ("in all tranquillity", but sold out). Paradoxically, these are (were) probably the only two means of enjoying the exhibition at its best. Hockney may certainly rejoice in the masses coming to see his work, but I don't so much – and surely I'm not alone.

It is not difficult at all to like David Hockney. After all, he is one of the most generous artists of our lifetime. His vast and diverse oeuvre delights, charms, engages and captivates. Whenever the painter talks about his work, or art history in general, he is supremely intelligible – effortlessly eloquent, to the extent of rendering the run-of-the-mill art historian/critic superfluous.

My Parents (*1977) Oil on canvas 72x72*
© David Hockney Collection Tate, U.K.

Maybe this explains the inanity of some of the PR campaign introducing this exhibition (left in the hands of public outreachers?). The Flemish cultural radio station Klara defined David Hockney as "one of the most important artists of the previous century." I suspect that Klara has copied this from the Tate Kids website, not the other way round. Screw his life and work of the last 20 years.

The introduction on the BOZAR website (anonymous) asks the interested reader: "Did you think that David Hockney was *just* a painter?" (chorus: Well, what else?) … "He's also active in a range of different media!..." (You don't say!)… "He doesn't shy away from experimentation [really, *sic*]."

Phew! Not a *mere* painter then.

The double David Hockney show at BOZAR meets my criteria for a memorable exhibition. Firstly, it stirs an atavistic feeling of freedom, and shows that the world is infinitely richer than everyday reality suggests. Then, as all good painting does (and this may not affect everyone, who knows?), it makes one itch to rush back to painting. Not in order to try doing stuff one has seen, just a general urge to create. To do. The 'creative urge', as it was known in good old 20th century vernacular. Lastly, since leaving BOZAR, the world has been mysteriously 'Hockneyfied'. I now cannot behold a tree without it being a Hockney-tree. Raindrops in a puddle I see through his eyes. Whole swathes of landscapes, even reproduced or on TV, now remind me of the Hockney universe.

Supposedly, one of the most endearing aspects of Hockney

and his work is his 'artless' curiosity, his receptivity to all that issues from the concert of the hand, the eye, and the heart – the painterly trinity. When Hockney says that "[…] we are not sure what the world looks like. An awful lot of people think we do, but I don't. […] pictures make us see the world" [1], I find myself in total accord. There is no pre-existant Reality, and I believe that Hockney knows it well. This principle is manifestly expressed in his whole attitude towards photography, *e.g.*: "We live in an age when vast numbers of images are made that do not claim to be art. They claim something much more dubious. They claim to be reality."[2] Or linear perspective: "No there [is no such thing as 'correct' perspective]. Of course there isn't." [3]

To describe Hockney's temperament at the artist's current age as 'childlike' seems disrespectful, but I find no better word. He is certainly no angst-ridden painter. He paints and draws with the cheerful gravity and the steady urgency of a guileless child, never fearing failure, unhindered by success.

But however charming, a child's drawing does not hold interest for long. Hockney's works, on the contrary, go far beyond being 'pretty pictures', they transcend the pursuit of beauty, so often attributed to painting (whereas no painter worth his salt can be bothered by this hopelessly redundant category). I believe this is because Hockney paints as much or more *how* he sees, as *what* he sees. In this, he joins a great tradition of painters such as Pierre Bonnard, who share a fundamental not-knowing of what the world looks like. Who set out to search, to hunt.

And this is why I do not share Hockney's lifelong love of Picasso. Picasso, who pompously claimed: "I don't search, I find." Who, in private, among his sycophants, mocked Bonnard for not being able to make up his mind as to the colour of the sky. Who derided his erstwhile *companion de route* Georges Braque, by referring to him as 'his wife'. Presumably, because Braque *searched,* thereby displaying an unfortunate lack of testosterone. Who criticised Matisse for redrawing the same line 30 times over, whereas all the while the first stroke was the right one. Besides my suspicions of Picasso's personality, there is something more fundamental at hand. What did Picasso heroically find, without searching for it? What else but an assumed hard and singular, much revered Reality? Like the average photographer, Picasso takes Reality for granted. He then disfigures, mutilates it for effect, but reassures the viewer: don't worry, Reality is safe. I believe that Hockney goes well beyond this.

What Hockney *does* have in common with Picasso, and this might explain his predilection, is an unstoppable and infectious creative energy. A bullish disregard for precepts. For example, I have always had issues with the sometimes plasticky appearance of acrylic paints. I still do. However, walking through both exhibitions, I suddenly realized that Hockney couldn't care less about that. Like a child, indifferent as to whether marks are made with crayon or spaghetti sauce.

Also, beyond the earlier paintings and prints, with their neatness of finish, I was surprised at how *bold* the painting is. No reproduction can convey how boldly, how feistily *My Parents* (1977) is painted. This is also striking in his 1987 copy of *Bathers* (1965), and, at the start of the exhibition visit, in the *grande machine* delectably entitled *Bigger Trees Near Warter or/ou Peinture sur le motif pour le Nouvel Age Post-Photographique* (2007). The largest *plein air* landscape painting ever engulfs the viewer. As you get closer, it becomes manifest how cursory the brushstrokes are. More a kind of wild calligraphy than reproductions suggest.

The dimensions, and the multiplicity of perspective invite the beholder to walk along it, towards it, and away again, just to get some handle on it. Unfortunately, this freedom of movement is hampered by the throng, and in particular by the chairs that someone decided to plonk in the middle of each hall. Add to that the hordes gathering to read the explanatory wall texts (do your reading at home, good people!), and you feel as if you're missing out.

During the lockdown of 2020, Hockney and his crew settled in rural Normandy, where he painted the changing of the seasons. In the run-up to the exhibition, I was a bit fearful of the acres of digital greenness in his iPad paintings. There is some of that, but as ever, Hockney's sheer energy, enthusiasm and curiosity abate or even abolish such concerns. Indeed, his cheerful gravity and steady urgency bring him to cross new frontiers. It only occurred to me as I was showing someone a recent Hockney on a tablet: in what way(s) was this different from the 'original'? Is this image on the backlit screen in fact 'truer' than the digital prints on the museum walls? Is any high-quality printout equal to the 'original'?

Lovers of the newfangled might be impatient for radical developments, but chances are that David Hockney's next Enterprise of Great Pith and Moment will involve a rock face, ochres and charcoal. I wouldn't put it past him.

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David Hockney: Works from the Tate Collection, 1954-2017 and *David Hockney: the Arrival of Spring, Normandy, 2020* from 8 October 2021 to 23 January 2022 at Bozar.

Footnotes:

1 *A Bigger Message: Conversations with David Hockney*, Thames & Hudson Ltd. 2011, p. 11.

2 Op. cit., p. 52.

3 Op. cit., p. 52.

Post-War Design in Milan

Graziella Colombo

Lamps and the Fiat 500 Car

Grillo telephone

TV set and Brionvega radio

Since 2007 Milan has celebrated the evolution of Italian design with a permanent exhibition at Triennale, an institution dedicated to the promotion, conservation and documentation of the history of design in Italy. Open with a newly designed exhibition space, it presents a chronological selection of the most important products from the post-War years to the early 1980s. During these years there was an intense experimentation in new materials – plastic for instance - and techniques which brought great changes in behaviour at home and in society.

Armchairs and chairs, sofas and tables, lamps, TV sets, and bookshelves are some of the many objects on display. There is the famous radio, the Brionvega (1965), formed by two plastic shells joined by a hinge, with an open-closed combination which indicates when the radio was in use or not. There is the Grillo (cricket) from 1966 designed by Marco Zamuso and Richard Sapper. For years this was the smallest telephone in the world, foreshadowing mobile phones. Its name comes from its snap-open mechanism and ringtone. There is even an example of the Fiat 500 (1960), the very small car so popular in Italy in the 1960s; designed by Dante Giacosa. Nuvola Rossa (red cloud) from 1977 is a bookcase designed by Vico Magistretti: when open it resembles a tepee, when closed a ladder.

As well as showing the the birth and use of new materials and technology the museum also aims to reveal how designers, craftsmen and entrepreneurs worked together to create innovative, interesting objects. For me art and design are two branches of the same tree: that one of creativity, beauty and functionality.

The Trienniale was born in 1923 when the first International Exhibition of Decorative Arts was inaugurated at Villa Reale in Monza. In 1933, 10 years later, the exhibition moved to the Palazzo dell'Arte in Milan, a big, modern building with large exhibition halls and public services. Despite the many social and political transformations taking place in Italian cultural and political life over the decades, Triennale has kept its role as a cultural centre where contemporary art and design can be shown and discussed. In 2023 Triennale will celebrate its 100th anniversary.

It has always been a mine of ideas and I hope it will be able to continue on this way.

Designers today face new challenges – recycling, adapting to new materials and developing sustainable projects. Ideas always move, always travel and never die.

POEM

The Day Of A Cunning Careerist

He learnt at an early age
To deliver taxed dreams
To his breakfast table,
Where he shared the fruit-juice and the papers
With his wife -
Spreading marmalade with
A small silver knife on their
Thinly sliced toast -
Bitter-orange marmalade to match
Their bitter orange destiny -
Listening to the news -
Rushing into the day believing it
To be important -
Driving over flyovers -
A quick drink with Tom
Wondering where his favourite tart had gone -
Her address lay sprawled in his diary -
The one he kept at the office
Under a pile of 'Time & Tide' and the
'Country Gentleman'
The devil you will find is a snob -
Whose club is somewhere off Charing-Cross -
As a tax is put on fornication, dreams,
New rugs and that drug which keeps
Youth locked into old men's groins
And lets fading women rich and vain
Believe they can be young again -
False declarations of courage and love -
Falls from the cunning careerist's lips -
As he eyes a woman he wants for the night -
Yet with surprise she leaves abruptly -
While he's still coughing out his words -
Then his ardent breath smelling
Of too much Guinness almost stops
His throat up -
She didn't hear a word - and he is furious -
Not being able to hatch his sex
Out of himself into her -
But he bends like a green sharp reed
And decides to catch the last train home -

Shänne Sands

from the selection Moonlight on Words
FootSteps Press 2012

The Body and the Soul

LIVIANA MARTIN

Visiting the exhibition 'The Body and the Soul' at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan takes you on a journey through the history of Italian Renaissance sculpture between 1400 and 1500, a story that speaks not only of the body of man but also of the movements of the soul and of the emotions in a new and realistic way. From inert matter, the sculptors have brought to light statues able to communicate, through their skill, human sensations, to upset and excite us, as if they were really about to come to life.

The exhibition also uncovers the roots of this expressionism in classical art and in particular that of the ancient Roman world. The statues of the Roman emperors, or of wealthy personages of the time, who have come down to us, express solemnity and vivacity in their features, they speak to us of their inner life. The findings in the most important archaeological sites, from Rome to Pompeii and Herculaneum, to name but three of hundreds, allow us to reconstruct their whole vanished world.

The discovery in 1500 near Rome of the sculptural group of *Laocoön and his Sons* (a Roman copy of a Greek original) will go on to influence entire generations of artists, both for the expression of pain associated with physical beauty and for the rendering of body movements . Laocoön, according to legend, was a priest of the god Apollo, attacked and killed together with his children by two sea snakes. The subject is a pretext for staging the bodies struggling in jumbled, dynamic, unstable movements. There is no longer the formal balance, perfected in previous sculpture, but a renewal of the aesthetic canons of the Greeks.

The most famous Renaissance artists influenced by these findings move from Donatello to Michelangelo. They draw inspiration from Roman sarcophagi and bas-reliefs, where the figures express contrasting feelings, which oscillate between the sense of fury and that of grace.

A little-known artist, Giovanfrancesco Rustici, in the *Zuffa*, two high-reliefs in terracotta, represents, in an exceptionally moving way, a scene of struggle in which men are reduced to the rank of animals and fight not with weapons but with bites. In this work one can hear the fury and almost the cries of battle. Grace, by contrast, is the characteristic of Verrocchio's *Angels in Flight*, a terracotta from 1480, a masterpiece of Florentine art. Angels are ethereal creatures, almost moved by the wind, which ruffles the draperies of their garments, as they advance with supple and elegant movements.

The reference to classical art can be found in the group of the Three Graces, Roman art of the second century after

Giovanfrancesco Rustici: Zuffa di Cavalieri, c1505
terracotta con tracce di bronzatura
Wiki Commons

Michelangelo: Pieta Rondanini

Christ, which represents the daughters of Zeus, a symbol of beauty, arts and fertility. They are naked girls who with their movements generate harmony in the intertwining of bodies in a kind of dance that is a union between external and internal beauty, through which the fullness of existence can be reached. The subject influenced legions of artists, from the painting of Botticelli and Raphael, to the sculpture of Canova and Thorvaldsen, to the poetry of Foscolo.

The secular path of the exhibition alternates with the religious one. Even Renaissance sacred art aims to represent the motions of the soul through the expressiveness of the bodies, it wants to disturb and move the spectators and, as in a theatrical performance, it stages the drama of death and the deposition of the body from the cross, of Christ.

The greatest master of sacred art was Donatello: in the *Crucifixion*, a partially gilded bronze bas-relief, the artist shares the pain of Christ and the thieves crucified next to him, the weeping of the pious women at his feet , the indifference of the soldiers watching the scene. The gilding of the haloes, robes and armour illuminates a dark and heartbreaking composition, as well as accentuating the tragic nature of the event.

In the mid-1400s, the Lamentations over the body of Christ, realistic reconstructions in painted wood or terracotta of the moment before the burial of the Messiah, spread to northern Italy. The magnificent figures of Mary Magdalene and St. John the Evangelist, in gilded and painted wood, the work of Angelo Del Maino, express feelings of pain in a dramatic and violent way, facilitating the imagination of the faithful and stimulating their participation.

In Rome, the genius of Michelangelo emerges, who in his works, of singular tension and concentrated energy, finds the synthesis between the scientific knowledge of the body, the absolute ideal of beauty and the intention to overcome nature through art: in the show at the Castle, we can admire Cupid, the little god of love, a marble statue caught in the act of extracting his infallible arrow from the quiver.

At the end of the itinerary, in a dedicated room worthy of the final of a very beautiful exhibition, we find the *Pietà Rondanini*, the famous unfinished work by Michelangelo, which represents the virgin and her son, who is slipping into death supported by his mother. The two figures are enveloped, almost fused together, in a last, desperate embrace.

As the curator of the exhibition explains, the exhibition wants to make us reflect on how the artists, although coming from different cultural centres (Milan, Florence, Rome), have found points in common in the representation of the subjects and in the way of working in marble, bronze, terracotta and wood, reaching very high results in most cases.

The Body and the Soul - from Donatello to Michelangelo. Italian Renaissance Sculpture, Milan
Castello Sforzesco, 21 July-24 October 2021

Andrea del Verrocchio: Angels in flight

Donatello: Crucifixion, *c. 1465 (partial)*
Bronze with gold and silver damascening,
Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence

Now Read This

Daniel Nanavati

We have come to that ludicrous space where the Disney-inspired marketing specialist Koons likens his works to the Renaissance. Not just one of the artists of the time but to the spirit of the age. Of all the 'human disciplines', the intellect that is Koons manages to mention four: philosophy, psychology, history and theology. Not much for word filling. He suggests this curiosity in learning goes right back to the Renaissance.

No, Koons, it goes back much further. Probably 2,000 years further in Europe, but who really knows? We've had the same size brains for 200,000 years, you'd have thought some questions were asked back-a-long.

He suggests that the Dark Ages had less travel, less trade and fewer opportunities for education than the Renaissance. This is a simplistic view of 500 – 1450 in Europe. What am I writing? How could Koons ever give anything but a simplistic view? He is right that Greek sculpture is credited with starting the Renaissance explosion in art though he doesn't mention the one sculpture that started the explosion - the Laocoön, and he doesn't explain why. It is an amazing omission.

He suggests that art needs a viewer to have a life, and as such he is half right because the viewer is a critic. The viewer has a response, whatever that response may be, and that response depends on the effect of the piece and the eye of the viewer: coming down often to their taste. The viewer will think about the piece and write words in their head about it and talk about it to others. That's criticism and without criticism there is no art. Artists in the past have been deeply self-critical - including in, but not especially, the Renaissance.

I do wish Koons and his cadre would finish their thoughts, but we all know not allowing people to write about art allows them to reflect upon their inadequate work and talk about it and the Renaissance at the same time. Without discussion the ludicrous flourishes. And then we get to the heart of this small piece in the *Financial Times* magazine: Koons has a show on in Florence. He says he had to pinch himself to find his work exhibited between a Michelangelo and a Donatello in 2015.

He's not the only one.

Artists like Koons hate people like me to write like this. What right do I have? Why does my opinion matter? I will tell you. Because real artists who are not walking egos are ignored. Because they have to die to be rediscovered decades later. Because their lives and worth are as nothing compared to the marketing specialists who work with the rich to make headlines about money – nothing to do with philosophy but a lot to do with psychology. Contemporary art is baffling in its inadequacies. Koons is one of its champions. In a world dying around us he talks of light, reflection and touching the future. In a human race whose overriding value system is mercantile, art has become numbed, incapable of changing the world around it; at the high-monied value end it only reflects what money wants to buy. The human condition has been banked.

I wonder in the marketing world in which we are imprisoned, if he even wrote this piece of drivel.

Laocoön and his Sons
also known as the Laocoön Group.
Marble, copy after an Hellenistic original from ca. 200 BC. Found in the Baths of Trajan, 1506.

Wiki Commons

Koons on the Renaissance: Financial Times, September 20 2021

Some But Not Others

Mary Fletcher

Newlyn Society of Artists is an exclusive group in that artists have to apply to be chosen as members and then apply to be in each show subject to selection.

This show had a theme of celebrating the history of the society with many members referencing particular artists from the past membership over 125 years.

I happened to go when they were having a public discussion about the society and when I arrived they were discussing if the society could provide an online source and publicity for information that might include social community art.

Art therapy was mentioned without anyone gasping in horror. When Mike Tooby, past director of Tate St Ives had interviewed me 20 years ago (I forget what about) he said they threw away applications that mentioned art therapy but they fished mine out of the bin because they liked my drawings. Now there's an artist exhibiting in the Tate drawings done by himself as art therapy when he was a child in Kosovo.

So somehow what I took to be based in fear of being associated with mental illness has dissipated as the wheel turns.

It's a diverse show with most artists doing what they usually do but managing to fit it into the brief.

Delpha Hudson had a picture with women and children in it and referenced Elizabeth Forbes. Winnie Lyn on the other hand showed some lumpy white objects as far from Terry Frost's work as could be imagined, although she said she was inspired by it.

Julia Giles had a similar motivation to Peter Lanyon in being influenced by her sensory memory of landscape.

Kate Waters had chosen fellow mystical dreamer Ithell Colquhoun to ally with. Her painting was a smeary sexual looking image.

Noel Betowski had chosen to show a painting that depicted complex patterns of folded paper and he had been inspired by two paintings with paper lanterns by Percy Gotch and George Sherwood Hunter.

Pippa Young said in her statement that her inspiration was the act of creation in general and her image was a strange figure combining white and black body parts.

Of course such a theme dangerously invites comparisons with the more famous past members' works, long known and loved and done with the sort of skill and observation that many visitors admire more than our present confusion of styles and media.

There's bound to be something of interest and something to hate for most visitors in the 68 exhibits.

The panel discussion came to an end. It suggested some new social awareness and political involvement with the local community, perhaps to revitalise this oh so middle class elite enclave where pictures cost thousands of pounds and membership is closely guarded. But were these suggestions coming mostly from academics and other non members involved with education etc? We will see.

Newlyn Society of Artists. 'Past,Present,Future' at Tremenheere Gallery Oct 16 to Nov 7 , 2021

Art Therapy in the Tate, St Ives!

Mary Fletcher

Petrit Halilaj: Very volcanic over this green Feather.
Photo: Mary Fletcher

I had concluded that the mainstream art world despised art therapy out of fear of being associated with madness.
Yet now here it is – Petrit Halilaj worked as a child with art therapist Giacomo Poli and this helped him cope with the dreadful consequences of the war in Kosovo. Now he has retrieved these vivid works, enlarged them, printed them on felt and hung them in the large gallery on knotted strings so that they form a whole forest of images - some frightening memories – some escapist fantasy – amongst which we can walk, catching sight of different views. Knotted string often features in art therapy case histories – symbolic of trying to keep yourself together through trauma. It's totally absorbing, tragic and lovely. These pictures have a spontaneous energy. This show takes your mind off your mundane worries and I emerged with that feeling of exaltation at having experienced something very important, easy to grasp and memorably moving.

Petrit Halilaj - 'Very volcanic over this green feather.'
Tate St Ives, Oct to 16 Jan 2022 (The first UK museum solo exhibition for artist Petrit Halilaj born 1986, Kosovo)

Have something to add?
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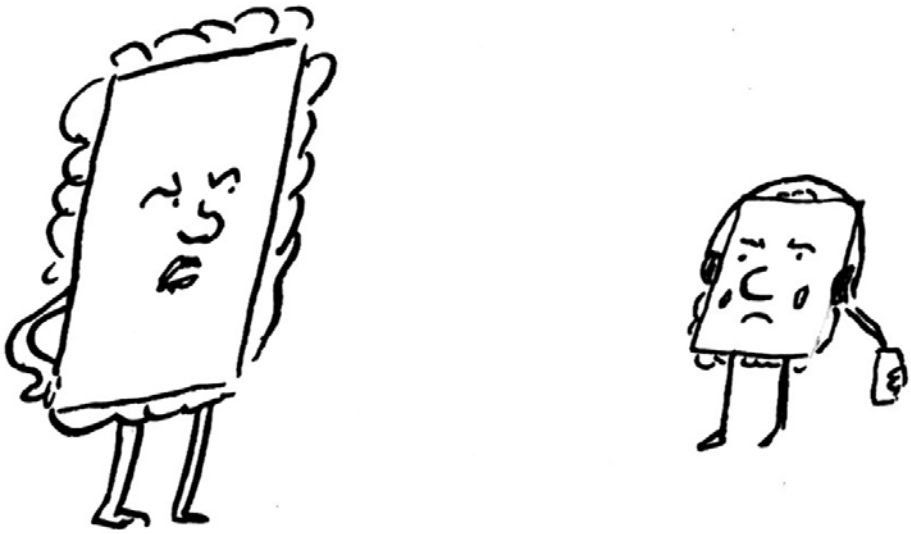
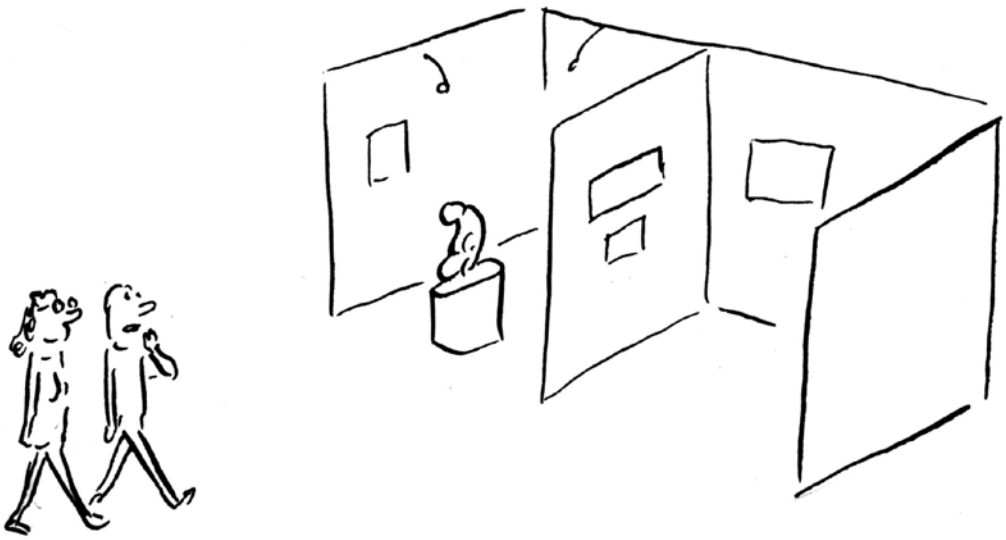


"Can't you date one of our own?
He is a sound piece, for God's sake."



"Which gallery should we check out first: the one with the best works by the worst artists or the one with the worst works by the best artists?"

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Russian Art: Free and Un-free

Rudolf Baranik - October 1990

Painting Beyond the Death of Painting, described as the first group exhibition of American art in the Soviet Union, opened in Moscow last September. It was on view for a month in the Kuznetsky Most exhibition hall, a somewhat alternative space run by the Artist Union of Moscow. The hall, located in Artists House, is in a hilly bohemian neighbourhood only a stone's throw from the Kremlin. It is a good place to sense the contradictions of the Soviet Union today. One sees the young women who work in the bookshops of the area, including one which specialises in Marxist/Leninist literature, wearing conspicuous crucifixes.

Donald Kuspit formulated the concept of the show, selected the work, and gave the exhibition its title, a title which puzzled the Moscow art world. An English-language poster, designed and produced in the States in the style of Russian Constructivism, was brought along to Moscow where we found a Russian language version in subtle minimalist style with the title translated adroitly into 'long-lived painting' having transformed a somewhat elegiac title into a triumphant one, the Russians felt better. The show also carried the subtitle *American Imagistic and Abstract Painting*, which the Russian poster omitted.

Was this really the first American group exhibition in the USSR? Hardly, although one could say that it represented the first large American group exhibition in Moscow since perestroika / glasnost. Soviet museum collections generally omitted American art, though the Pushkin Museum has works by such American left-wingers as Anton Refregier, Raphael Soyer, Alice Neel, and Rockwell Kent. Kent has for decades been a soviet favourite: his romantic northern landscapes and leftist politics suited the pre-glasnost *zeitgeist*.

As I visited the Pushkin this time, I remembered an earlier visit during the Brezhnev era, now known officially as the Era of Stagnation. A large oil portrait of the chief stagnator hung at the entrance to the main gallery, and I noticed that while the portrait was painted with adequate skill, a few of Brezhnev's medals were more sketchy than the rest. "The painter got tired at the end," I said. "Oh no", said the sophisticated young curator with bitter irony, "the medals were added by our own staff when Comrade Brezhnev received additional honours."

How the Era of Stagnation, and the Stalin era before it, stunted Soviet art became graphically clear in the current Moscow exhibition of proposals for a monument to the victims of the Stalin era. The banality of symbolism ran through all the styles, and figurative and abstract works were equally full of bathos. The minimalist pieces were among the stronger pieces – at least they were not embarrassing. Most viewers seem to agree with the assessment of one Soviet critic: "the show underscored the fact that art was among the chief victims of Stalinism."

Vanguard is equated with the New York – Düsseldorf axis. The frantic reaching for the au courant stops many artists from digging deeper and robs them of the internal aesthetic which might lead them to "let the chips fall where they may."

I was one of the thirty-three artists whose work was selected to show that painting lives on beyond its death, and among the twenty or so artists who made the pilgrimage to Moscow with the curator, coordinator, poster designer, and several other Americans whose roles remained unclear to me. Some art critics from New York also travelled with us on the way to an international art critic's conference in Tbilisi, Soviet Georgia.

The title of an exhibition like the title of the work of art is not all that important, unless it carries a specifically demonstrative message. The title of our show emphatically did. It was unavoidable that many would question the show's title. It came up at the main press conference with Donald Kuspit and the First Secretary Of The All Union (USSR) Artist Union Tair Salakhov responded to questions. But after Kuspit gave his intricate learned answer. The question was not asked again.

During the crowded opening of the show I took off the badge which the artists were given to wear so I could unobtrusively listen to comments, and I listened mostly to what was being said by those I presumed to be Soviet artists or art students. Those who walked around silently with authoritative expressions I took to be critics. There seemed to be a lot of discussion about the intention of the exhibition. In spite of the title (or maybe because of it?) the Russians expected a less traditional group of works. "Where is the anti-aesthetic?" Meaning, 'where is post-modernism?' Not surprising, since at the hall entrance viewers were greeted by Alex

Katz's big Moose, which I last saw at the Whitney.

Pravda, the still stodgy central organ of the party, came out with the reportage on painting beyond the death of painting the morning after the opening. The reporter, G. Bacanova, said that the show comprises works by "33 drawing Americans." The presumption that this was a young show did not start with *Pravda*. During the opening I repeatedly heard remarks about "these young Americans." It did not register, however, till I heard some students remarking in front of my paintings that "this young artist paints very poetically." In the name of anti-ageism I intervened: "no, my young friends, this artist is not young at all in fact I am the artist." They looked astonished, but one of the students composed herself and said: "Ah, but your soul is young." Soul, *dusha* in Russian, remains as common a word today as when *Dead Souls* was written by Turgenev.

Comments on individual works were the best indicators of how the show was perceived. There were surprises. Joan Nelson's conceptualism in imitating cracks in miniature landscapes of the past was missed by many. On the other hand, some works which I considered deeply American and not especially accessible to other cultures drew attention. This was especially true of a small and modest painting by Benny Andrews, showing part of a figure and a brown hand resting gently on a slightly darker hand, apparently that of a dead family member or friend in a coffin. An American, and surely an American conscious of Black history, would read this image through the lens of the struggle and sufferings of Black people. And perhaps Russians would recognise in such a work something which touches their emotional nature. But some viewers at the Kuznetsky Most interpreted the work more specifically. I heard a young man say to his girlfriend: "do you think it is about lynching?"

I think that in spite of some of the puzzled reactions to its composition, the show selected by Donald Kuspit was a very good one to be shown in the Soviet Union at this time. As a serious show it counteracted the prevalent perception that to be liberal means to be Western, and to be Western means to be un-serious, sarcastic, flippant, and prone to antics – the opposite of stagnant, contrived and dogmatic, or what cultural life in the Soviet Union was thought to be. I find it sad to talk to young artists who know the work of Jeff Koons and not of Hans Haacke, who know Neo Geo but not the work of women artists using imagery informed by feminist convictions. One understands why the Russians are tired of messages, yet I would like to see in their hands a Russian translation of Lucy Lippard's *Get The Message*? But that will take time.

I went with Hans Brender, Phoebe Helman and Jack Sonenberg, three artists in the show, to attend Sunday mass in the neighbourhood where we got a glimpse of old Russia, or perhaps, the new Soviet Union. In the churchyard of the small Russian Orthodox Church, a grey bearded old man

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wearing the traditional loose shirt sold newspapers – not *Pravda* or *Izvestia*, but the *Moscow Church Herald*, the official organ of the Moscow diocese and the Patriarch of all the Russias. The front page of the *Herald* carried an editorial which criticised the government for being too slow in returning churches appropriated for other purposes, such as anti-religious museums and factories. Equally moving was what we saw inside the crowded little church. While the colourful Eastern Mass was being conducted in the centre, a young priest was baptising one crying baby after another on the right, while two open coffins with the dead laid out drew mourners on the left. Women bent their shawl covered heads to kiss the foreheads of the dead in the old orthodox tradition, or fashionably dressed young couples wiped with towels and tried to quiet crying babies.

Nothing so graphic could be perceived in our search to understand Soviet art, probably because we expected to understand more, to get under the skin, so to say. As I think back one cannot judge Russian art without the consciousness that the visual arts have always lagged behind literature, music, theatre, and ballet in Russia. Can we think of Russian painters or sculptors who mean as much to the world as Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoevsky or Turgenev? The icons were a fruitful transplant from Byzantium. The avant-garde, which thrived just after the October Revolution, was more an outburst of hope and enthusiasm than visual power through formal sensibility, and at a time when modern art had strong support from the revolutionary government. Trotsky, busy organising the Red Army, found time to think about art, so much that he later co-authored with Andre Breton a surrealist manifesto. Bukharin, the chief ideologue of the Third International, was for avant-garde art, Lunacharsky, the Commissar of Culture, wrote that formalism is to be regarded as something valuable, calling formalism "a vegetable out of season." But all this caved in under the socialist realism theories of Andre Zhdanov and Stalin's brutal repression. It caved in because the foundation was not strong enough, because when the Russians looked at their immediate artistic past they could find only Repin, a sentimental

follower of Rembrandt and a genre painter by impulse.

Before I went to Moscow last fall, I knew something about contemporary Soviet painting and sculpture, because of previous visits in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s and from following developments since *glasnost* entered the global vocabulary, but this visit led me to conclude that while art is now free from ideologically reactionary dictates and state pressure in the Soviet Union, a new un-freedom, insidious because it is self-imposed, exists. Many Soviet artists have reacted to their new freedoms with the belief that they must be as vanguard as possible. Vanguard is equated with the New York – Düsseldorf axis. The frantic reaching for the *au courant* stops many artists from digging deeper and robs them of the internal aesthetic which might lead them to "let the chips fall where they may."

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Philip Guston once wrote that when he starts to paint, four silent guests sit in the corner of his loft: a leading critic, a museum curator, an art historian, and a respected friend. But as he goes on working the intruders silently get up and leave one after another. During the long period of oppression a different set of intruders sat in the corners of the Crown studios of Soviet artists: a party ideologue, a critic from the party controlled art press, an academic art historian, and a representative from the bureaucratic artists union. The union-controlled exhibitions, prizes, sales, commissions, and creative assignments – paid stays in the countryside on the warm seashore of the Crimea. From my talks with Soviet artists and visits to their studios it became clear that the post-*glasnost* intruders are as follows: a dealer from New York, a reporter from *Flash Art*, a collector from Germany and an art lover from the fashionable technocrat set. In a sense these monitors are signs of success but they also control and hamper individual development.

If you combine *de rigeur* with the traditional Russian artists' inclination to play the artiste, you get Vachtangov. Vachtangov was one of three artists' studios a small group of Americans visited one afternoon. Our host gave us a list of clusters of artists located in the same area of the city to choose from. Since none of the names seem familiar, I and three others chose Vachtangov and group because the name has a glamorous ring in Russian history. It turned out that this artist was the grandson of the great Vachtangov, founder of the experimental Vachtangov Theatre. His father was an intellectual who was exiled under Stalin and our host Vachtangov saw himself as the heir to the dynasty. A small saturnine man with black beard and intense eyes, he moved nervously and talked incessantly, hardly fitting into his tiny studio. He showed us on a viewer about 60 slides of his work and then announced; "Now I will show you the originals," and he started to bring down from an attic paintings which we had just seen in slides.

Vachtangov personifies the myth of the driven artist who lacks an emotional centre. While the work he showed us only covered the span of several years, it included what he called Expressionist work, old period, Minimalist period, experiments with pop-aesthetic, romantic work, the most emotional, beautiful, and finally quasi-photorealism. "I say quasi because I'm not good at it yet." When we asked Vachtangov some mundane questions about how he manages to live and work in such a tiny space, how he makes a living, he cut us short: "I am Bohemian, you are Bohemians, the creative fire burns everywhere, Bohemia!" Younger artists whom I met were as a rule more suave, played it cool. But they also were determined to be demonstratively free, which made them un-free. These artists have invented their own personal censors which tell them to be sophisticated and modish.

In talking to artists in Moscow I sometimes wonder whether they were really so hepped up about the most vulgar, commercialised aspects of the Western art world that they had lost their Russian-ness? I thought it couldn't be, so I was reassured when I encountered even nostalgia for the old Russia of birches and pine forests, sometimes expressed by the same people who were a minute ago admiring everything Western. The nostalgia is often an outgrowth of the defence of the environment against material and visual pollution. Many young people in the Soviet Union belonged to green clubs, which constitute, in fact, a Soviet version of the Green Party. The agenda to reverse the damage done to the land and the cities is more daring than ours in the West. Soviet art reflects this kind of intensity, the great turbulence in the life which surrounds it, and may seem frantic to outsiders. But it is unavoidable that in its own time Soviet – Russian art will find its way. This must come without duress of any kind – it will happen slowly – and in the quiet solitude of artists' studios.

Rudolf Baranik 1920-1998
Fireplace
Oil On Canvas

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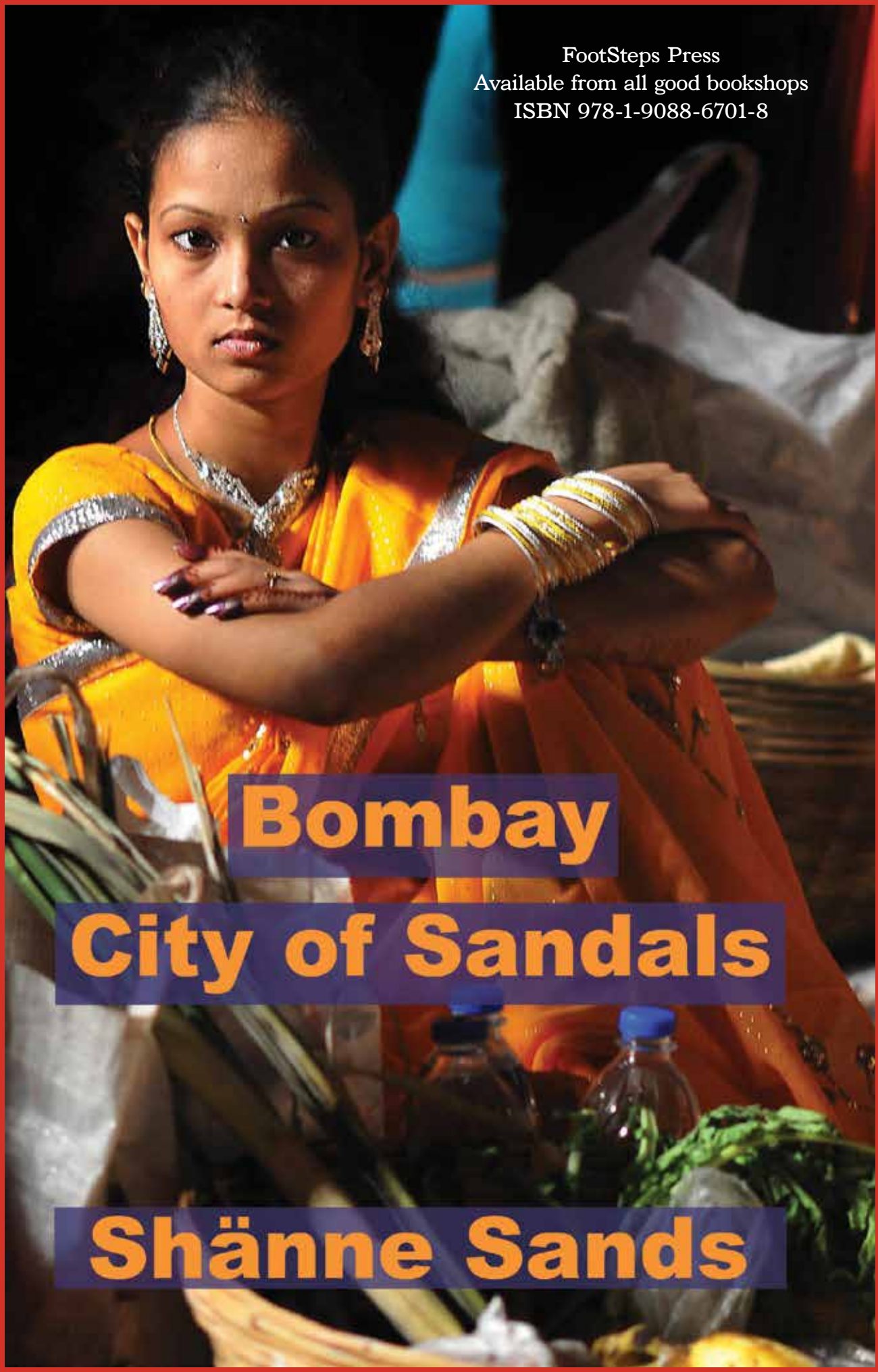
In Italy, the separation might be invisible but it is still tangible, and very much in the way of everyone willing to work
in the arts field. Other cultural forms and organizations might be a good starting point: they could, perhaps, represent a chance for the institutions to put aside the fear of losing their apparent supremacy within the artistic sphere to rethink the system and rewrite its future. Many more occasions for encounters between students need to be implemented, opportunities have to be provided and new bonds created: this is the meaning of a new understanding of the system, Academies+Universities.



FootSteps Press
Available from all good bookshops
ISBN 978-1-9088-6701-8