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Upcoming Issue

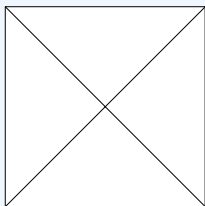
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Heart and Soul: In Defense of the Painterly

By David Markus

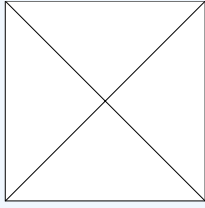


Tra Bouscaren. The Lovers. Oil on Canvas. Courtesy of MATCH Artspace

It is easy to concede the cold esotericism in contemporary art as something of a *donnée*. Thoughts of Chelsea conjure words like "slick," "abstruse," "hermetical." Yet we forget (sometimes purposefully) that there are as many gallery venues (read: SoHo) for humdrum academically rendered depictions of landscapes, interiors, and still life as for the intellectually distended stuff we have come to accept, however undeservingly, as the sole subjects of critical inquiry. In a much deliberated rant about the virtues of direct observational painting, David Hockney recently remarked that the three things an artist needs are an eye, a hand, and a heart. Gazing at New York gallery listings (and perhaps this is Hockney's point), one may be inclined to wonder "where is the heart?" When it comes to figurative painting, must we be forced to choose between sentimentality and sterility—between the bourgeois earnestness of Jack Vettriano and the joyless irony of John Currin? Sometimes the answers to such questions lie east of 8th Ave. Sometimes "I don't want to go to Chelsea."

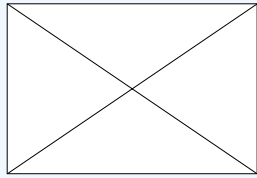
Thankfully we live in a city ever-turning on the spindle of young ambition, and alternatives do exist. One of them is the MATCH art space, located just east of the white-box epicenter—in the "old" Chelsea if you will (that of the fabled hotel whose neighborhood is its namesake). MATCH is an intimate, if not humble, viewing space. For its director, Marc de Bourcy, it functions as office, *kunsthau*s, and residence. It also recently harbored one of this summer's only solo shows that can consider itself qualified by Hockney's three-point criterion. Indeed, the work of Brooklyn painter Tra Bouscaren is the product of not just an eye, a hand, and a heart, but a soul.

James Hillman is the chagrin of academics, and the sage of those who lay claim to the sometimes pejorative, sometimes boastful label



- The Sonic Self II: The Coalition of the Willing

- Evolving Traditions - An online curatorial project by Raquel Chapa and Daniel Rothbart



- soundworks::soundscapes:: by Jolanta Gora-Wita :: music news by Patricia Pac



- Art Against War "Poster Show" at 450 Broadway and Columbia University

- ANIME organized by Pawel Pilkowski

- LOOP'00 Video Art Festival

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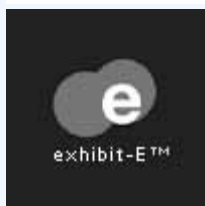
controversial idea that affliction might sometimes be productive. As he writes, "the soul can exist without its therapists but not without its afflictions." Contemporary art, it would seem, can exist without soul, despite whatever afflictions it may convey—but how wonderful to see that it doesn't have to. Bouscaren's artwork conveys affliction, but his painterly pathologizing links him to some of the past century's greatest soul-driven artists.

Although the exhibit's title, "Group Show in My Head," reflects a gamut of subjects, ranging from monkeys, to tigers, to pre-historic fossils, Bouscaren's commentary is unyieldingly directed at mankind. *Man is The Measure of All Things Unfinished* is a depiction of two dueling tigers, yet it is apparent from the motley, impulsive brushstrokes and reworked edges that the title's aphorizing pertains less to the ferocious animals themselves than to the formal and philosophical considerations of the artist attempting to convey them. Anthropomorphized depictions of animals such as *Monkey Contemplating a Daisy*, and a sculpture composed from an ancient fossilized head, enshrined in paint chips assert a genetic procession in which painters are the descendents of cavemen, not astrophysicists. In a battle between sensuality and intellect, the former is trump. Bouscaren's approach turns Platonic idealism on its head, imploring us to embrace our darker imperfections. The painter's endless, striving attempt to capture his surroundings thus becomes linked with man's attempt to contain the primeval nature within himself, and the results are nothing less than stunning.

I've Got to Stop Eating Plutonium is a portrait of the artist in the self-scrutinizing tradition of Van Gogh, Artaud, Rembrandt. Here one could swear the canvas had reached its projected half-life. Bright red predominates in an image that seems burned on the retina of its beholder. Turp droplets dapple the corroding surface like acid burns, and the canvas seems intent on peeling itself from its masonite mounting. With its frenetically overlain strokes of fat paint, the "Unfinished" has become *overdone*, but only in the most effectual and self-aware sense. The title of Bouscaren's self portrait would seem to reference the toxic lead-based paint associated with many an oil painter's eventual descent into madness. By conflating the themes of creation and self-destruction, Bouscaren weaves the latest pattern in a trans-historical motif whose threadwork runs from Van Gogh to Chaim Soutine to Phillip Guston.

Last Winter's Met retrospective of this last artist began with a discussion of the bare light bulb that recurs in Guston's work and is associated with the closet in which he found creative solace as a child. What was not discussed was the emergence, in Guston's later work, of the ropes and nooses which, in those flat, cartoonish paintings, have a striking metonymical correspondence to the light bulb form. This visual pun (light bulb=noose) is perhaps Art History's most poignant symbol for creation bound to suffering.

Guston is an artist to whom Bouscaren's work makes repeated, sometimes overt reference. But in historical and methodological correspondence, Bouscaren most closely resembles Soutine. Bouscaren's series of prostitute paintings from his time in Marrakech and Tangiers can be thought of as a restaging of Soutine's restaging of Courbet, wherein the same unabashed effrontery of both artist's and sitter's gaze is apparent alongside a naïve classicism of slippery paint and slippery perspectival vantages.



personal collection—a Christ-like figure bearing the grisly wounds denoted by the title is set in a pose bearing grotesque similarities to one of Soutine's carcasses of beef. Here, Bouscaren makes literal the figurative connotations of death and demise engendered by Soutine's abattoir renderings. Soutine's death-obsessed, "suffering artist" persona has been described as uniquely Judaic. Bouscaren, who is Catholic, reminds us of his own faith's propensity for self-martyrdom.

No Mel Gibson jokes, please. Bouscaren is an artist whose capacity for benevolence extends beyond the making of his own mythology. His means, however, are passionately confrontational. By sacrificing fastidiousness, he ventures into realms in which the only matter of importance is self-expression at the moment of its enactment. There is a naïvety to his works which might be called "bad painting." But his technique is not without a philosophical agenda: taking a "behind his rightful time" craving for oil on canvas and shoving it down his viewer's throat. In one corner of the MATCH artspace, there sits a fustian pile of paint rags like the oversized head of an art school janitor's mop. The oil-smear sculpture represents, literally, the creative excrement of Bouscaren's feast-like indulgences. In its fecundated unseemliness, it powerfully restores faith in the maxim of process over product.

Since Kandinsky touched the void of abstraction, the various re-emergences of figurative painting throughout the past century have been met with mixed reviews. Phillip Guston returned to figuration in his late career, using so-called bad painting to ridicule corruption and violence. John Currin (the contemporary figurative artist Bouscaren least resembles), uses bad painting to ridicule *bad painting*, and in so doing produces nothing beyond a portrait of his own artistic consternation and methodological constipation save for a few wise cracks about the very bourgeois culture that has so embraced his work. Bouscaren's brushwork owes much to the abstract expressionists (whom Soutine influenced and Guston strayed from), yet his re-figurations of figurative painting are as refreshing against the backdrop of post-modernity as Soutine's must have been against the backdrop of intellectual cubism.

When I arrived at the "by appointment only" MATCH, de Bourcy had Thelonious Monk playing on the loudspeakers, forging in sound and sight a profound synergy of improvisational spirits. What the photograph-dependent painters Hockney deplores are most lacking is this very ability, exemplified by the only two great, uniquely American art forms (Jazz and Abstract Expressionism) to make risky decisions mid-stride. When it comes to painting, obsessive premeditation can be "murder one" to the results. What Bouscaren possesses that the criminals of contemporary art don't is Heart and Soul.

Tra Bouscaren's OPEN SPACES: A Project by the Verein FreiStil e.V., a Berlin exhibition ran September 18th - 30th.