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## At the Galleries

FOR SHEER LOOPY CHARM LAST SEASON, nothing beat the French designer-sculptors Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne's furniture at Chelsea's Paul Kasmin Gallery. Perhaps best known for their life-sized sheep-sculptures of the 1960s and '70s—woolly, long-nosed, long-eared lovelies that served as benches—the Lalannes have, over the years, found connections between an entire bestiary of unlikely creatures and the utilitarian objects of everyday life—assuming that everyday life is extraordinarily high-style and disciplined. At Kasmin, there were non-functional pieces—a giant apple, perching birds, and a monkey or two—but they were less appealing than the works that “did” something. A demented cabbage on bird legs was an exception, but for the most part, it was the witty double lives of the Lalannes' objects that made them engaging, rather than their sculptural properties alone. A domestic-sized, bronze rhinoceros, as streamlined as the Chrysler Building, gained a good deal because of the contrast between its deadpan expression, improbable shape, and the fact that its midsection flipped down to reveal the neat pigeonholes of a secretary desk. Similarly, a larger-than-life seated baboon, in cast iron, as implacable as an Egyptian deity, was more compelling because its stomach opened to reveal a fireplace. The baboon's arms swivel out of the way when the firebox is in use, one hand grasping the moveable front plate of his belly, and the disjunction between this rather silly effect and the beast's gravitas and symmetry was delightful. Also notable was a smallish bronze hippo whose haunch, flank, and jaw opened on an amazing number of cunningly fitted compartments for a bar. The angled wings of a giant, shiny bronze butterfly seemed at once poised for flight and served as the back and seat of a bench, while crocodiles and monkeys twined through other benches and tables. And for those nostalgic for the sheep, a flock of rams, ewes, and lambs, black-faced and lop-eared, but not woolly, filled Kasmin's small auxiliary space on 27<sup>th</sup> Street, guarded by a narrow-hipped French sheepdog.

The Lalannes' language is an updated version of Art Deco, often combined with the sinuous curves of Art Nouveau, along with a host of other references to the history of modernism. Cocteau's sconces from *La Belle et la Bête*—the candelabra grasped by human hands in the Beast's enchanted castle—inform the Lalannes' visual puns, absent the portentousness of Surrealism. The couple shares, as well, Claes Oldenbergs' antic spirit, but where Oldenbergs' disheveled, non-utilitarian

objects are vernacular celebrations of the doubtful merits of American consumer culture, the Lalannes' sleek, functional furnishings are paeans to the natural world, albeit the natural world refined, polished, and brought into a chic Saint-Germain apartment. Ultimately, the flavor is unmistakably French, partaking not only of the tradition of the great makers of luxury furniture from the court of Versailles to the twentieth century, but also of the tradition of the garden folly and, perhaps, even Boullée's fantastic buildings. Whatever their intellectual inheritance, however, the Lalannes' creatures are irresistible.

An entirely different aspect of recent European art could be seen in "*Mi Forma de Mirar*"—"my way of seeing"—at Galeria Ramis Barquet, a selection of the work of the esteemed Barcelona painter Joan Hernández Pijuan, spanning roughly the last decade and a half of his life. Pijuan, who died in 2005 at seventy-four, was both a virtuoso of the sensuality of oil paint and a master of economy and nuance. His paintings are resolutely frontal and object-like, with drawing that can reassert the proportions or dimensions of the canvas either with a single emphatic gesture or with insistent parallel strokes. But these restatements can also be made in terms of looping scallops, swaying "chains," or improvisational scribbles, always in an exquisite, slightly tremulous handwriting that contradicts the apparent severity of the initial conception.

The Catalan Pijuan's lean, elegant abstractions are indebted to the work of his near-countryman, the Mallorcan Joan Miró, in the 1920s. Like Miró, Pijuan plays fragile ambiguous drawing against subtle modulated expanses, but his language is his own. Pijuan's surfaces are sensuous and materially very present, in contrast to the disembodied perfection of Miró's, and his line is loose and spontaneous, in contrast to Miró's achingly sensitive, tight, wristy drawing. Confronted by Pijuan's deceptively casual pictures, we can imagine how they came into being, despite their evident inwardness and reticence. Yet longer acquaintance makes us aware of subtleties and complexities that suggest that nothing is as straightforward as we thought. Like many Spanish painters, from the seventeenth century to the present, Pijuan preferred to work within a restricted palette, building his pictures out of layered near-monochromes of earthy ochres, milky off-whites, and dull black-grays. With time, we realize that these apparently single hues are often the result of overpainting and scraping; sometimes, energetic drawing plows up underlying layers of fairly intense color, so that we see *into*, as well as across, the juicy expanses of paint. Deliberate imbalances and asymmetries declare themselves, competing for attention with the frontality and assurance of the paintings.

For all their abstractness, Pijuan's paintings can also seem to be about landscape or, at least, about the big, open, empty spaces of so much of rural Spain, as well as about the geometric buildings that punctuate those empty spaces. Inflected sheets and layers of creamy paint become metaphors for an intangible infinite, while simultaneously invoking such realities as vast fields and plains, and blank stucco

walls, without losing their identity as pigment on a surface. Among the most enigmatic of the paintings in “*Mi Forma de Mirar*” were a pair of white monochromes from 2005, *Pati blanc I* and *Pati blanc II* (“white patio”), each densely scraped and layered, with a broad band of “excavated” drawing delineating a square, offset against the rectangle of the canvas. In these economical images, Pijuan seemed to be attempting to paint absence, yet the result was anything but minimal. At once diagrams, maps, and walls, both plain and plane, *Pati blanc I* and *Pati blanc II* also were powerfully suggestive of unbounded space and the fact of paint on a surface. And then, just as it seemed that the dominant theme was, after all, the materiality of paint and the artist’s actions in spreading it across a surface, everything shifted and we felt as if we had moved through a momentarily delineated door into some other zone of immeasurable enormity. Equally mysterious was *Terres blanques*, 1996 (“white lands”), an almost square, almost white canvas traversed by scratchy parallel lines that somehow were pried apart, angled and compressed, without fully declaring just how and when this marked shift occurred. Here, too, the space seemed unstable and mutable, despite the declaratively applied pigment and the deceptively forthright composition. It was a pleasure to see this fine group of Pijuan’s works, but the show also underscored how much he will be missed.

If restraint and introspection are key elements of Pijuan’s work, exuberance and self-assertiveness are among the most typical characteristics of Frank Stella’s “Von Kleist Series,” a group of large-scale paintings made in 2000, and a series of related reliefs and collages, selections from which were shown concurrently at Danese Gallery, Chelsea, and Jacobson Howard Gallery, on the Upper East Side. The series, whose title refers to the work of the German Romantic novelist Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811), gave us Stella at his most audacious, exploiting what seems to be every one of the illusionistic, abstract pictorial “events” he has developed over the past twenty years or so. Stella plays warped grids against overscaled printer’s dots, sets liquid pools against jagged cartoon-like explosions, and pits zigzag shapes against blobs and honeycombs. The swirling “smoke rings” of earlier series turn up, as do a whole range of digitally manipulated, linear “cages” whose reason for being, it appears, is to demonstrate the permutations of visual illusion. These are not images for the faint hearted; Stella expects us to stay with him and keep working our way through his irrational but compelling spaces and non-spaces. Relatively calm areas that might provide moments of repose are, for example, often marked with concentric grooves and lines that turn planes into topographical maps. Stella reminds us of our ingrained habit of interpreting diminishing size with distance and forces us to read angles as signals of three-dimensionality. Everything collides and crashes, even the mouth-puckering color.

Spending time with the von Kleist images is like watching some cosmic battle enacted by cartoon warriors who exist mainly as abstract concepts but can morph into new forms whenever we focus on them.

Some passages suggest an apocalyptic showdown between high art and pop culture, or maybe it's a fight between the whole tradition of Western illusionist painting and digital animation. But if this sounds like chaos, think again. Despite the vernacular language, the cartoon blobs, squiggles, and explosions, the result invites comparison with the grand schemes of the High Baroque rather than with the present-day, mechanically produced advertising images whose technology Stella sometimes appropriates. Like a spectacular Baroque ceiling, the heart of the Danese show, the enormous multipanel *Marquise von O*, 2000—forty-three-feet across when fully deployed—surges with large unifying rhythms that override, albeit temporarily, the staccato meetings of spatially distinct elements. Of course, Stella being Stella, and a wholly modern artist conversant with the entire history of his discipline, the Baroque analogy obviously doesn't adequately explain these works. Stella's elusive, active space, for example, is not illusionistic in the sense of suggesting any place that we know or could imagine entering. Instead, the space of the von Kleist series is at once active, shallow, and otherworldly; things seem to project towards us and then retreat slightly—like Cubism on steroids.

The polychrome reliefs seemed the most initially accessible of the von Kleist series, perhaps because their literal three-dimensionality rationalized the abrupt spatial dislocations on which the entire series depends. The large collages, too, appeared to make Stella's intentions more intelligible, for a similar reason. But the sheer grandeur and heroic size of the paintings made their staggering complexity seem inevitable and right, and the longer we looked, the clearer and more convincing these amazing images became. (Even the color became richer and less abrasive.) Stella has long been exploring ways of translating the great legacy of painterly illusionism into the language of abstraction. With the von Kleist series he seems to have fully achieved his aim. The only disappointing aspect of the twin shows was their failure to present these monumental objects as they should be seen. In a just art world, immense, important works by a living American master, such as *Marquise von O*, would have been shown together on the ample walls of a major museum or in one of Chelsea's megaspaces, rather than being truncated to fit into Danese's rather awkward upstairs galleries. I suppose we should be glad to have seen any of the von Kleist paintings, but it would have been even better to have seen more of them in more accommodating surroundings.

Richard Kalina's recent paintings and watercolors at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., while more intimate—nothing much over four feet in any direction—were, in some ways, as disconcerting as the von Kleist series. The first impact of Kalina's pictures came from their lush, intense color. (They're made with flashe, a super-saturated pigment remarkable for its brilliance.) Glowing raspberry, luminous ultramarine, intense malachite green, delectable plum, and acid yellow, presented in geometric, repetitive units, set up complex rhythms that at once recalled Indian, Middle Eastern, and North African decorative arts traditions, medieval

manuscripts, the borders of stained glass windows, and much more, including the paintings of Paul Klee, without particularly resembling any of them. Kalina uses these gorgeous hues to animate, syncopate, and even subvert the frontal, symmetrical, apparently systematic arrangements to which he attaches them. He keeps us guessing, and, in the end, thwarts our expectations of cracking his codes. He seduces us with his lush, vibrant palette, convincing us by the apparent lucidity of his compositions that we will eventually understand internal relationships that govern the image, and then, just when we think we've figured out the sequence in one picture, baffling us in another. This tension between the preconceived and the intuitive, the deduced and the invented, is paralleled and reinforced by Kalina's method, which pits the hand against the near-mechanical. What appear to be carefully plotted and gridded paintings are, in fact, "mosaics" of painted paper, collaged together, sometimes in orderly progressions whose logic can be parsed, sometimes in more casual arrangements whose rules, if any, defy even careful observation.

At Lennon, Weinberg a selection of full sheet watercolors proposed a wealth of alternative statements of Kalina's themes. Some declared themselves relatively quickly, but unlike the majority of the paintings, which demanded that we seek the determinants of their color relationships, many of the watercolors reminded us of the power of the irrational. Again, there seemed to be connections with textiles, tile patterns, even flags and emblems, but these were fleeting associations. The best of Kalina's idiosyncratic pictures seemed at once enigmatic, high-minded demonstrations of persistence and intelligence, and arresting objects that delighted the eye—not a bad combination.

Other demonstrations of intelligence, persistence, audacity, and invention could be found at Sideshow, in Williamsburg, where Elizabeth Josephson showed two bodies of work from the past two years: portraits and improvisational paintings of fantastic "deities." Josephson is a fearless painter, uninhibited in her use of color, and able to manipulate paint, wax, and collage so energetically that her best pictures seem to have happened almost in spite of her intentions, through a combination of accident, will, and overscaled gestures, executed at arm's length. Josephson plays fast and loose with anatomy, proportions, and even features, in her portraits and imaginary images alike, but she nonetheless convinces us that we are in the presence of distinct individuals. The simmering intensity of her portraits suggests that Soutine and de Kooning are among Josephson's heroes, and perhaps Alice Neel, if Alice Neel were more in love with the sensual physicality of paint and less interested in clear boundaries.

Arresting as many of Josephson's portraits were, a group of recent, slightly sinister paintings of "deities" were among the most noteworthy in the show. Conflations, it seems, of her interest in Buddhism and psychoanalysis, the images ranged from an introspective Buddha-like character, studded with smaller replicas of himself, to big-haunched, nude "goddesses" splayed against the canvas, at once objects of devotion

and themselves devotional offerings. In one, an agile, heraldic antelope-like creature competed for attention with the figure. The elastic scale of Josephson's figures, with their oversized limbs, small heads, giant feet, and so on, suggested mobility and speed, and, at the same time, animated the space they occupied. Drips, washes, splatters, and swipes of deep indigo blue dominated these richly imagined pictures, bringing associations of both the sea and a range of non-Western textiles, adding yet another layer of meaning and rendering the space even more unstable. A little approximate, assertive, and eerie, Josephson's images were uningratiating but nonetheless hard to forget. I look forward to seeing the descendants of those dark blue gods and goddesses.

Those requiring a more extended dose of gritty figuration could fully indulge their taste during the overlapping runs of three exhibitions: the Metropolitan Museum of Art's informative survey, "Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s," and the showings of recent work by Lucian Freud and John Currin at Acquavella Gallery and Gagosian's Madison Avenue space, respectively. "Glitter and Doom" anatomized the social, political, economic, and artistic instability of Germany in the wake of World War I. A superlative selection of paintings and drawings by Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, Christian Schad, George Grosz, and some of their less celebrated colleagues presented us with a brilliant, often disturbing cross section of Weimar poets, art dealers, doctors, roués, performers, available women, artists, hangers-on, transvestites, disfigured war veterans, and more. The cumulative effect of this rogues' gallery of acutely characterized individuals was almost overwhelming. Despite the virtuoso refinement of, say, Schad's suave paint-handling, the unwholesomeness of his subjects almost always outweighed the elegance of execution. Dix rarely presented any of his subjects sympathetically, suggesting that they indulged in unsavory practices even when they were benign businessmen, respected lawyers, or much-admired physicians. A tender, full-length portrait of a frail poet was an exception.

What was striking about most of the works in the show was their essential conservatism, despite their superheated imagery. The realist painters associated with the "New Objectivity" appeared to have aimed at shocking their audience by adopting risqué subject matter, but their physical means remained conventional. Only in the exhibition's Beckmanns was intensity conveyed by touch, heightened color, and the materiality of paint. A 1929 seated portrait of a *Young Argentine*, from the Munich Pinakothek der Moderne, was one of the most potent works in the show: disciplined, brushy, and fierce, its subtext of smoldering decadence implied, rather than, as in many works by other artists, illustrated. Yet the exhibition's two large galleries of drawings—almost a show within a show—revealed even the most cautious of the painters of New Objectivity to be astonishingly incisive, powerful draftsmen. And one vigorous drawing by Karl Hubbuch, a nude seated in one of Marcel Breuer's Vassily armchairs, reminded us of what else was happening in Germany at the time: the great interdisciplinary modernist experiment

at the Bauhaus, the effort to combat the nasty undercurrents that inform “Glitter and Doom” with the salubrious effects of order, rational design, abstraction, and high principles.

Seeing Lucian Freud’s latest offerings soon after seeing “Glitter and Doom” suggested that the reigning bad boy of English painting would have been right at home in 1920s Berlin. His perpetual air of courting outrageousness for the sake of outrageousness, rather than for compelling aesthetic reasons, has not been diminished by advancing age. (Neither has the pretentiousness of presentation, but that’s another issue.) As usual, Freud’s nudes were speckled with arbitrary agglomerations of paint, emblematic of effort and indifference to ordinary notions of beauty and of picture making, his viewpoints were slightly embarrassing, and the peripheries of his larger canvases rather slack, as if his attention flagged once his gaze left the body. The strongest pictures at Acquavella were the closely focused, vividly characterized portraits, both paintings and drawings, where urgent, loaded brushwork and vigorous gestures became equivalents for passionate engagement and excited looking. The oddest picture in the show was a large “landscape” of the small garden outside Freud’s studio. The relentless overpainting and subdividing of incidents resulted in an image as overloaded and airless as anything the pre-Raphaelites ever produced, but lumpier. (It’s kinder to pass over the hagiographic exhibition of photographs of Freud at work that accompanied the show.)

In the interest of full disclosure, I must declare my official status as cultural dinosaur, at least in response to the recent John Currin show. I confess that I am completely baffled that anyone would take this work seriously for a moment, much less that Currin should be hailed as a major painter. His googly-eyed, kitsch drawing style (somewhere between Norman Rockwell and that old *Playboy* magazine cartoon character, Little Annie Fanny) is repellent, his color banal, his touch unremarkable—twenty seconds of close looking affirms that Currin is not the master some say he is—his surfaces dead, and in this show, at least, a good deal of his imagery pretty loathsome. That included some unspeakably boring still lifes of oversized white china, unredeemed by uninspired compositions and dull paint handling. A couple of “straight” images of Currin’s oh-so-adorable son were simply sentimental, but the rest swung between repulsive—two pregnant women, inexplicably (and inexpressively) deformed—and predictable—the show’s much-discussed, laboriously rendered porn. Currin’s magazine-based threesomes, with the usual anatomical exaggerations, might possibly have titillated a teenage crowd, but they were otherwise pointless, unappetizing, and actively undistinguished as paintings. In comparison to Currin’s tawdry offerings, Schad’s self-conscious portraits of the kinkier denizens of the Berlin demimonde looked like Ingres and Freud’s even more self-conscious “money shot” nude like a descendant of Courbet’s meaty earth-mothers. I just don’t get it.