

JOAN MITCHELL FOUNDATION
2005 MFA Grant Recipients
Catalogue Foreword

For the fourth year the CUE Art Foundation is pleased to host an exhibition of the Joan Mitchell Foundation MFA grant recipients. This year's exhibiting artists received awards in 2004 and 2005. As always, this show is a diverse and energetic snapshot of the contemporary visual culture. My task here is an easy one as the work speaks quite eloquently for itself. But before I address the work, I want to remind the reader that the art world is not all hype, art fairs and commerce. There exist many selfless organizations and individuals of all stripes who have dedicated all or part of their energies in service to artists. The art press would do well to occasionally feature these good works for they operate at the very core of the entire art enterprise. The list of small to middle-sized institutions is long and luminous. The Joan Mitchell Foundation, The Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation, The Warhol Foundation, The Elizabeth Foundation, The Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Artists Space, White Columns, Apex Art, and our own CUE Art Foundation are but a fraction of the organizations operating in New York. The work they do is as vital as it is varied, but is sometimes lost in the face of the blinding headlamps of the careening glitzy art world caravan. Occasionally, we should all stop and give thanks to those who serve artists' needs so effectively without public fanfare.

When Giotto painted his miraculous cycle of frescos detailing the life of St. Francis his images were the only ticket in town. The peasants wandering across the broad plain at the foot of Assisi climbed the grueling steps to the church to have the equivalent of a media experience: those paintings filled the modern place of film, TV, books and magazines. How amazing it must have been for an artist to have little or no competition in the visual arena. Granted there were itinerant troupes of actors putting on the occasional show, but in terms of images it was all about painting and sculpture. Fast forward to the present with its barrage of images of all sorts - billions of them interrupting every field of our vision - and still artists seem to find ways of producing compelling objects and audiences (around the world) still metaphorically wander across the plain to see them. I can only think that significant numbers of humankind find some sort of solace when they witness acts of the singular creative imagination. That imagination is abundantly evidenced in the broad array of approaches within this group of twenty-one artists. Remember that these artists were chosen for this award based upon the excellence of their work, not because they shared any thematic point of view. That said, certain themes do emerge, some visual and some conceptual. So, let's take a look.

Eileen David tells us that she is obsessed with the play of light, shadow and surface of the urban landscape. That obsession is well borne out in her painting *Red Bridge* depicting a bridge and cranes imaged against the smoky light of a harbor. The real story here is the zigzag girder structure caught in layers of light. We take pleasure in the cadence of the eyebeams as they alternate between solidity and near transparency. The natural world makes an appearance in the painting primarily in the hazy atmosphere almost threatening to dissolve the reality of the bridge itself.

This is not, however, another rehashing of the nature/industry dialectic. Ms. David really loves this stuff - the world has not been blighted by manmade structures rather it has been enhanced by them. Now that's original thinking! Bridges, tunnels, aqueducts and other such structures are heroic; they defy natural law and make possible the impossible. They are often all that is left of great civilizations and yet they are ultimately doomed to failure, abandonment and collapse.

Tomory Dodge builds that failure into image/structures made of paint. These tenuous constructions seem to be going up all the while they are coming down. The heroic impulse is present, no doubt... but salvation will not occur. The heavens will never be pierced. Like the Bruegel painting of the Tower of Babel, its construction is in perfect sync with its collapse. Or in so far as Dodge's brush strokes begin to tie into figure-like images, a better art relative might be Gericault's epic Raft of the Medusa. In Dodge's Dress Up we can almost make out the desperate and futile wave of the sailor who seems oblivious to the despair behind him. Rescue means little to those who have already lost what they love. Dodge's tower has humor but my sense is that it won't be funny for long. Also not funny for long are the pseudo whimsical machines of Charlotte Becket. Sweeping, Ms. Becket's entry in this exhibition, has a full Dada pedigree. It accomplishes nothing and repeats that accomplishment over and over and over. But Dada caricatures of technology are no longer possible, as our world is truly new and brave. Becket's piece is mindlessly thorough and the sweeping motion is no longer clearing away annoying dust and ash but collecting data carefully culled from the most private facets of our lives. There is a stupidity and an ineffectual quality to its repetition. Thus far that has been the case. The forces of control and prying are mismanaged but just wait a bit - the relentlessness of the "machine" will eventually arrive at its goal. When the humor falls away we are faced with a more sober tracing of our world. The rich surfaces of chrome and steel, the fascinating geometries of towers and transmitters and the sinuous strands of wire and cable are the "front face" of forces far more nefarious than those materials and structures reveal by themselves. Becket's creations fascinate but we now must look beyond their allure. We were globalized well before we knew to use the word and the tangle of power now seems quite impossible to dismantle. Nicola López is the art world's portraitist of that tangle. In her ambitious installations and here in a large drawing, Shifted Ground, we can discern the enmeshed webs of deceit, surveillance, clandestine delivery systems, false utopias, public boondoggles and nature rape all twisting and cavorting with a Darth Vader-like viral malevolence. The seduction is there too...mind yourself. López draws with the beauty of a siren's song: lovely from a distance and monstrous at close range. I don't really believe in absolute good and evil but I think I just changed my mind.

Rollin Beamish shares much of the energetic and explosive drawing of López's nightmare tangles but his intensions and processes are quite different. In We can do it! We have the prostheses! images are abstracted, colorized and pop-ified. The corporate, electronic and cultural barrage is still a source of inspiration but painting with a capital "P" has entered the interpretive fray. Color and shape tear at each other forming and reforming synergetic bonds, which are all temporary, in flux. Beamish's painting is a verb and the forms within it adverbs. Beamish states, "Re-structuring is both healthy and inevitable... when a breaking point comes, will we have the mental and emotional fortitude to culturally survive it?" Paraphrase as, if we no longer have a center or a home to reference amidst the "re-structuring", then we are in deep trouble.

The world as rendered by Beamish or López can never be home to us. There are no cozy moments nor are there memories. So how do we define home? Even more importantly, how do we find it? Bobby Dylan, in the opening sequence of Scorsese's film No Direction Home says, "You see I was born very far from where I am supposed to be and so... I am on my way home." Many artists share that feeling. Making art becomes a way of piecing together a path back to a place we may not even recognize when we arrive. So what does this have to do with the work of Chris Knight? Everything! Mr. Knight is literally patching together a world to live in or at least one he can believe in. In The Way Home (steam shovel), a village has popped up on a mountain complete with construction machinery. Knight's memory seems to be building itself a space, an outpost if you will, and we are implicated into that world as we are witnessing the very act of making a memory of place. The foreground of this painting is an abyss, but there is hope for some more construction if only the shovel can reach up into the mid-ground to fetch some real earth

upon which to continue the work. His village, however, is hardly a representation of an idyllic homeland... no land of milk and honey. There is poetry but it is of the post-apocalyptic variety. "Two riders were approaching and the wind began to howl." It is after the riders leave that it really gets bad.

Look at the work of Eugenie Tung. Like Knight, Ms. Tung is also concerned with memory and home but whereas Knight is a dreamer, Tung is a more of a rationalist. Tung reports a transient life, many moves, many things/people left behind. How does an artist hold onto and, dare I say, even memorialize that life? It's through that "piecing together" I referred to earlier. She begins by remembering concrete aspects of her past apartments... the placement of furniture and rooms. Like witnesses of a crime the process of memory is flawed from the get-go. That is her first document and from that comes the interpretive painting step of the venture. Formal elements (and other demands of painting) take over. The memory/ blueprint is only fodder for this step. Finally, actual photos of past homes are used, wiped clean of belongings, neutralized and vacated. In her piece 632 North Arthur Street, #69, 9/1995-4/1997 the past is coveted, then aestheticized, and finally erased. Alice doesn't live here anymore, or moreover, "let's move to Brooklyn now 'cause we're going to end up there eventually anyway."

So we now venture even further into the unknown. The pretext of Gandalf Gaván's constructions are interior spaces: table-like things, lamp-like things, display-like things and most importantly mirror-like things (their eyes are our eyes) which inhabit space with great animation and wit. Imagine if the Jetson family were an anarchist cell - Gaván has done their décor up with a mischievous, maybe even mean, hand. Reliability and comfort are replaced by morphed form, reflected form and sentient form. This is a self-reflexive theater set - it is at once set and audience. Like a Rube Goldberg machine lapsed into a moaning state of nihilism, Gaván gives us a bit of entertainment but little hope. Six years into this Millennium and things are really a mess. Gaván is coming damn close to a vivid portrait of that mess. From Gaván to Lynn Richardson requires a leap of scale but not of substance. In fact the big theme in this group of artists is the corporatized and militarized threat. López puts the high beams right on it but Becket, Beamish, Knight, Gaván and now Richardson all take aim as well. Richardson's title, Inter-glacial Free Trade Agency "Icehouse: Artificial Hydroponic Fruit Juice Stand" says it all, literally! We are caught in an extension of Gehry-esque architectural whimsy and a corporate infotainment/sweets concession. Mary Shelley couldn't have done better! Except we live within this Frankenstein. Even the beauty of the sculpture is slippery. Like López, there is a big seduction here - drink from this juice stand and they've got you.

All politics are local and Amer Kobaslija allows us a window into his local world - his studio. Northern View is a painting, not a real experience. We are being guided, controlled and perched just where Mr. Kobaslija wants us to be. Time is slowed and each surface, each object and each relationship holds no hierarchy over another. Even the white wall and the industrial door seem to have import. Unlike a photograph, this is not a moment in time. Instead, this is all times compressed into one single time waiting to spring open upon viewing. Kobaslija's consciousness in this space is palpable and dare I say Proustian. The easy thing to do would be the voyeuristic glimpse into the romantic bed of creative activity (think Francis Bacon's studio detritus). The difficult thing is what we have here... the question all artists face in the studio: how to begin?

Of the nine artists discussed thus far none have used the human body as a primary reference point. That is precisely the point of creative departure for Ruijun Shen. The body in a piece like Root #2 inhabits a space far beyond its mortal limits. The natural landscape - mountains, rivers, waterfalls etc. - is fused with the organs, limbs, hairs, and orifices of the human body. Yet that simple naming process is futile for as soon as one fixes such an image, it morphs into its

landscape counterpoint. The world itself is an organism - the micro world of the arterial body system is mimicked by the macro system of streams, rivers and oceans. The seduction here is Shen's masterful use of Chinese brush painting technique of stacked up space and form upon space and form into a choreographed tower of interior/exterior dialectical movement. Gorgeous!

Turn the body focus knob towards higher resolution and we have two artists, although quite distinct, who employ soft sculptural approaches to avatars of human/animal form. Elisabeth Higgins O'Connor describes her installations as "settings where the cautionary tale, private anxieties and natural history museum dioramas mash-up..." The figures in *Doze... dose... dos-i-do* are at once proud and wounded. Their somewhat defiant stance forces us out of pity and into pathos. They become as familiar as our own anxieties - as though we were turned inside out to witness our patched together psyches, our internal scars and our battered histories. They mirror our own grotesque grace. Located less on the psychological side and more within the social sphere are the theatrical arrangements of Saya Woolfalk. As exemplified in *Paradise Imagined*, the bodies, the architecture, the videos and the paintings all combine to play out complex themes of sameness, otherness, gender and sexuality. A still image does little justice to the performances Woolfalk is noted for, however, her costumes function whether inhabited and animated or flaccid and still. The ritual is implied, the dance is inevitable as are the roles taken. From the beginning as it is today, the notion of human progress is a simple and silly vanity.

The mythologies of Woolfalk are further morphed and explored by the paintings of Jim Gaylord. What exactly are we looking at in *Yield Generosity of Manner*? Fragments of dramas, images and settings organized, as by Woolfalk and Higgins O'Connor, into theatrical clusters. Like the scrap of paper in our wallets with that mysterious telephone number on it, we struggle to remember, to recognize and to assemble a cogent narrative experience but alas, we are left only with ambiguity and to our own devices. The signposts are pointing but the place names are gone. These dramas continue but again gain focus and particularity in *Submerged* by Sharmistha Ray. There is little ambiguity here as two blustering heads play out their respective arguments within the context of a deluge of mythic scale. They spit and spew great boulders (heads?) at each other, each one equally implicated in what is a murderous and brainless battle. Their eyes fixed only on each other they are unaware of the consequence of their venom. Sound familiar? It comes as little surprise that Ray has levered this painting and others out of the devastation of 9/11.

Ray's drama, however serious the consequences, has an absurdist edge. Michael Ogilvie's work, *Comet Fried Chicken*, finds its voice purely within the choir of the absurd. The self-destructive streak, so painfully reported by Ray, is still very much in play in Ogilvie's "comics". As scripted our chicken begins crossing the road. Soon aware that the danger is not of this world but of the cosmic world the chicken hopes in vain that in the "re-cross" all will be saved but alas. Fate is fate as the comet and the chicken had a rendezvous long ago mapped by physics and plain ole' bad luck. The idyllic color and the simple rendering speak to the naive and the innocent. Ogilvie injects that naive setting with a confounding content. He puts it clearly: "The essence of my work/my comics is to examine the moments of when this pleasure peaks and then recedes..."

In Yoonjo Chun's powerful procession of figures, innocence and naivety have gone by the wayside. The road these beings travel in Chun's *Path*, is a mythic one. Are they accumulating mass from the long cotton strings trailing behind them or are they losing mass to the unraveling strings? Either way, they are caught up in a lonely march plodding along forever. Chun reports that the repetitive elements in her work metaphorically address her own journey as someone with serious hearing loss. The years of repeating words for correct pronunciation and of using hearing devices - which equalize and in a sense neutralize the world - all find voice here in Chun's muffled cotton string figures. Artists of quality find strategies to imbue personal themes with

more universal ones. Chun's sensitivity to her materials and to issues of scale create a world with a potency and poetry.

The medium may not be the complete message, but in Chun's work and that of Shervone Neckles, *Below Deck* (ship quilt), the medium is inextricably linked to the message. Employing techniques of quilting, collage and printmaking Neckles has woven together an object which serves as a document, a distant memory and a living witness to the human cargo of the slave ships. There is a sense of delight, pattern and joy in the animated delivery of this image and yet it is anything but joyous. Neckles states, "The quality I admire most about Black Culture is the strength to find humor in the midst of struggle and pain." By handling and embellishing the image its horror is neutralized and accepted. Power is put back in the hands of those wronged by history and the quilt becomes the object of comfort it was meant to be. An amazing conceptual turn-around! A remarkably similar transformation occurs in Earl L. Fyffe's piece, *Shanty-t*. We are presented with a wall/shelter - a stand-in for what Fyffe identifies as a shanty. Cobbled together and sitting akimbo to the floor, the patterned face of the piece brings to mind the painted huts of some African villages or the corrugated walls of poor Caribbean neighborhoods. Yet the construction signals care, resourcefulness and even defiance. Like Neckles, Fyffe reclaims territory which could be seen with sadness and pity and transforms it into art and beauty. *Shanty-t* is, in Fyffe's own words, a "tribute to the... resilience of the human spirit."

Shifts of scale and context are offered up by Beth Krebs in her piece, *Speculative City*. Here the city is condensed, its architecture abstracted and schematized. The multiple layers of sensory overload we associate with large cities are edited and orchestrated. However, the experiential elements of the city are still very central to this sculpture/video installation. The tiny epiphanies - the moments of surprise and wonder we have in an average day in the city - are rendered with great care. Like a chef reducing a sauce in order to intensify flavor, Krebs poetically curates the sounds, the near and far sight lines and the layered geography of the urban environment to great effect. Art does not imitate life - it betters life.

Finally, like Neckles, Sean Riley references the quilt and its rich and deep social history. In Riley's case, however, it is the quilt's formal and structural qualities that entrance and inspire. Riffing on the grid and the symmetry/ asymmetry of pattern, Riley turns the visual language of the homespun social circle into an object of visionary delight. *Mother's Work*, at eight feet square, takes its place with large scale abstraction of the post-war era but stirs in the mystical energy of such visual originals as Hilma af Klimt and Emma Kunz. The repetitive labor of the quilt in Riley's work is magnified and extended into patchworks of fascination and visual contradiction. The delight of the Shaker sensibility (a cited inspiration for Riley) is manifest and dare I say, glorious. That concludes this year's roundup of award winners. What's refreshing in this group is the absence of art world gimmicks. The work is fresh, imaginative and brave. Congratulations to all.

By Gregory Amenoff, April 2006
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