ART

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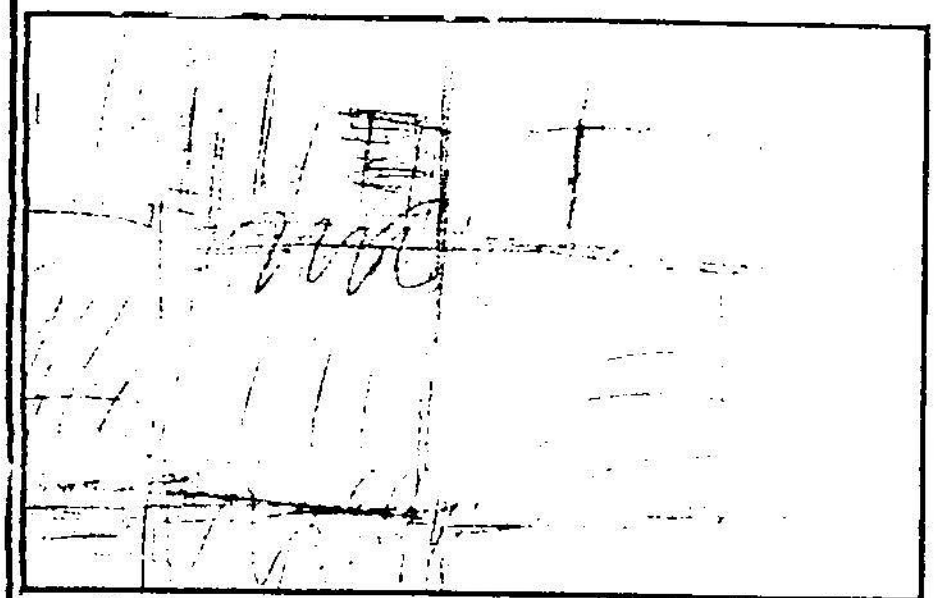
Drawing Words



Detail from Sonia Balassanian

William Zimmer

There have been two recent exhibitions of art by women whose inclination and urge to write shows up strongly in their work. **Sonia Balassanian** (at the Lotus Gallery) lays down large expanses of grid squares in the subtlest of colors; a pale flesh tone may dominate a painting but there will be areas or an occasional single square in a contrasting darker color, as if tiles had fallen out of a wall. The grounding, though stable, is thus activated; nothing is regimented with Balassanian. For all its spontaneity, the grid is the fixed element, the base line. The artist then proceeds to write across the grid.

It is the most elemental of dualities, free lines against fixed ones, but Balassanian carries it off with great elegance and lyricism. One is reminded of other artists: Cy Twombly comes especially to mind, but Balassanian's writing is completely without Twombly's brute quality. Some of the scribbling is dense, reminding one of hair or other nappy textures atop the grid, but the most interesting markings remind one of an invented language, and this is where the major accomplishment lies.

Balassanian is Armenian, and the poetry she writes in that language is replete with precise visual details juxtaposed with memories. It is sensual and surrealistic. She has chosen a surrealistic mode for her poetry and an abstract one for her painting, but I can't help feel that her freest abstract marking is her poetic reverie, her feelings and images, continued in an invented language that has overtones of Middle Eastern calligraphy. It is like the automatic surrealism of Miro.

It is an interesting coincidence that the most dogged practitioner of "concrete" poetry, a few words in a carefully chosen type-face on an otherwise blank page, is Aram Saroyan, also an Armenian. He has said, "I tend to draw words." With increasing confidence Sonia Balassanian is also drawing words.

The virgin piece of paper, before anything is written on it, was a formidable thing for Mallarme, but **Patti Smith**, who finds her inspiration in the nineteenth century symbolist poets, shows no timidity about attacking the page. The strengths and flaws of her poetry and music carry over into her visual art. The drawings (at the Robert Miller Gallery) are loud, sometimes lyrical, sometimes obscene and very often incomprehensible.

It is obvious that Smith is no interloper, no dabbler in drawing. She can make her pencil line do what she wants it to. It conveys a variety of moods. It is sometimes jagged and frenzied, but elsewhere she makes it elegant, as in a portrait of Mallarme. There are words everywhere, most of which are unreadable, and she erases a lot. Most of what can be read is smartass anyway, so it's better to let the drawing do the talking.

The drawings remind one variously of Picasso, of Dali and in a couple of explicit cases, of De Kooning. What is rare in these coming-out-of-minimalism days is the panorama of her subject matter, heaven and hell, good and evil. Because evil is brassier in Smith we tend to see it more.

Robert Mapplethorp's photographs of Smith were also on view. He puts her through a lot of routines and she doesn't look as if she likes it; the camera lens seems to be the formidible thing for her, she's not clowning before the camera. The duality of her bold activity as an artist and pure passivity as a model is provocative.

The title of the recent show at Brooks Jackson, "Borderline Drawings," intrigued me, for it suggested something on the edge, this side of chaos and nihilism, and I wondered what it could be. It turned out to mean that artists call these substantial and sometimes ordinary-looking works "drawings," according to their working procedures. In many cases "studies" would be the appropriate word.

One tries to see as many group shows as possible during the summer and doesn't feel hesitant about reporting on them after the fact, to alert people to who may be having a show during the season. I liked **Allen Daugherty**'s thick drawings of roplex and acrylic. Folded like sheets or towels, the resultant chunkiness resembled sculpture, but being on paper or canvas, one understood how "drawings" applied.

John Giordano affixed all manner of natural materials to paper, and because of his previous work, they probably contained alchemical allusions. A rose in a pool of blood red was especially striking.

The basic alchemical properties of air, earth, fire and water were the basis of the walk-through mandala fabricated by **Richard Zelens** at 112 Greene Street. Strips of exotic fabric, floor to ceiling, defined the four properties; there was a diamond shaped area in a different color for each. It was a sensuous experience to move from red, to green, to yellow and blue. 112 Greene is ceasing operations. It was one of the first of what have come to be known as alternative spaces. One hopes that the magic inherent in Zelen's piece transmits 112's successes to other such enterprises. •

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