"Sweet Dreams," by Philemona Williamson.

### Philemona Williamson: Fractured Tales

Philemona Williamson paints preteen females who float in pairs across canvas with the lightness of schoolgirls at a moon-struck tea party. There is a charm, even a sweetness, to them that sets them far afield from the surrealist frisson to which the exhibition lays claim. Figures drift and turn in gravity-free spaces, more like untethered astronauts than Chagall's airborne couples. Topsy-turvy cupcakes, hovering goblets, stylized flowers and buoyant oddments provide local color for dreamy narratives that waft over the surface with the insubstantiality of light fiction.

Williamson is a talented illustrator. She is a capable draftsman with a fine sense of color and composition. Her juxtapositions of color areas, each with its delicate tonal transitions, are undeniably deft. "Garden Gift," for example, tucks two pairs of shoes—one vermillion, the other a lucent cadmium red— into the variegated leaves of a row of purpled fall cabbages. The auburn hair of one girl echoes the warmth of the reds below and moves the eye up and across the image. The entire canvas is infused with a blush that underscores the girlishness of the motif.

But surface appeal is not enough to cover for the slenderness of the work as a whole. What Williams does not have is an adult reason to paint. The work's weightlessness is as much conceptual as compositional. For all the earnest claims of the gallery's press material ("the searching, the alienation and the commonplace tempests encountered in the growth to maturity"), nothing more consequential resides in these motifs than in the decoration of a girl's room. If a visual analogy were needed for chick lit, this would fit the bill. There is a certain cuteness to these vacant-eyed little girls that is better suited to picture books than to a gallery setting. Serious narrative painting requires a more mature and sustained ambition than what is visible here. Perhaps it will come. **[Maureen Mullarkey]**
**Through Dec. 14, June Kelly Gallery, 166 Mercer St., 212-226-1660.**

### Luc Demers: Darkened Rooms

In 16 large photographs, Luc Demers' *Darkened Rooms* explores photography's relationship to light and an underappreciated darkness. The pictures are of dark, empty rooms with what light there is leaking in from behind shuttered windows and doors ajar, creating the brooding atmosphere of a horror movie. A few stand out as almost minimalist compositions combining simple geometry with an inky black background.

Much of their eerie beauty is in the artificiality of the light. In "Bedroom," a window looking out on a bright day provides little light to a dark room. A translucent blind deadens the light coming in, and objects in the room can barely be discerned. "Night Light" and "South Window" seem to embrace the purity of darkness, as well as that of light. Dark blinds are backlit, framed by the stark white of windowsills. Divorced from context and grounding, the rectangles float in an abyss of deepening black.

For Demers, light operates both as illuminator of objects and as the original color of photographic paper. It's the light portions of paper that remain unchanged during the developing process. Likewise, an inkjet printer sprays ink in areas designated as shadow to create an image of a three-dimensional object. In *Darkened Rooms*, Demers attempts to rethink the notion of photography as "the medium of light."

Like many contemporary photographers, Demers is on an "exploration of absence." The few rooms that we see are in passing, and devoid of bodies and human interaction. Almost a joke on the "shut-in artist," light is kept out, behind pulled blinds and nearly shut doors, utilized best as an abstraction and a subtle suggestion of its potency and photographic importance. **[Nicholas Wells]**
**Through Nov. 27, Coleman Burke Gallery, 636 W. 28th St., 917-677-7825.**

### The Pugilist and the Heiress: Works by Meraud and Alvaro Guevara

*The Pugilist and the Heiress* sounds like the title of an overlooked MGM musical circa 1952, but it is, in fact, an exhibition of paintings by the British modernists Meraud and Álvaro Guevara at Lori Bookstein Fine Art.

It's something of an event as well: The Bookstein show is the first time paintings by this husband-and-wife team—a word used advisedly here, given Meraud and Alvaro's fractious marriage—have been displayed together. Anglophiles will take interest in the couple's association with the Bloomsbury crowd. Devotees of 20th-century art will note the connection to Gertrude Stein and Pablo Picasso—Meraud introduced the two. Fans of painting will be charmed and, in the case of Meraud's uncanny "Still Life," bowled over by the couple's minor key accomplishments.

Heiress to the Guinness brewing fortune, Meraud studied painting at The Slade School of Art and was later mentored in New York by the great Russian sculptor Alexander Archipenko and in Paris by the great Dadaist gadfly Francis Picabia. It was in Paris that she met Alvaro, a Chilean ex-pat and champion ex-boxer, who had done an earlier course of study at the Slade. Within two months, Meraud and Alvaro eloped, but the marriage was a loose-limbed, mostly separate affair, due, in part, to Alvaro's homosexuality, but also to each partner's stubborn individuality.

"Back Door," by Luc Demers.

That's the way it comes across at Bookstein. Could Meraud and Alvaro be any more different as artists? Meraud's portraits and still lifes are weighty-bordering-on stolid, hearkening to Picasso's neo-classical phase and imbued with a dry strain of Surrealism. Alvaro was given to giddy, almost frivolous depictions of leisure—theater, café society, napping in the park, like that. Meraud's brush molded mountains, Alvaro's lighted upon moments. Their collective paintings don't butt heads so much as blissfully go their own way. *The Pugilist and the Heiress* offers a discreet and lovingly paced glimpse of their quixotic relationship. **[Mario Naves]**
**Through Dec. 11, Lori Bookstein Fine Art, 138 10th Ave., 212-750-0949.**

### Betye Saar: Cage: A New Series of Assemblages and Collages

For her fifth solo exhibit at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, Betye Saar has produced 21 provocative mixed-media assemblages and seven collages. Collected by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Whitney and many other major institutions, the 84-year-old artist shows no sign of slowing down. For this show, she took cages that she had found over the years in flea markets, yard sales and antique shops, and used them as frames for works that primarily focus on containment and confinement. They function as metaphors in her exploration of repression over the centuries and around the world, especially the treatment of black people in American society. The collages deal with similar themes, their occasionally ironic titles revealing her jaundiced view of unexamined attitudes and values. But though her message is angry and clear, she's never didactic, brilliant at creating complex works that are as captivating as they are disturbing.

The sculpture "As the Crow Flies" features chubby, doll-like, brown babies stuffed into a quaint, old-fashioned boat. Meticulously assembled, it gives a powerful sense of the conditions on the slave ships and the utter hopelessness of the captives. At the same time, it's perfectly constructed, with all the elements—wave beneath the boat, birds on bow and mast—conspiring to convey a physical sense of despair. One experiences the same horror looking at "The Weight of Color." On the bottom of the three-piece, tower-like sculpture sits a weathered scale. On the next level, there's a cage holding a black crow too big for the space, its wings sticking out of the bars, a lock attached to the cage door. And on top stands a small rose-colored statue of a demure black woman, dressed in apron and cap. With shockingly apt imagery, Saar refers to Jim Crow and the selling of slaves by weight. The piece goes beyond illustration by using particularly resonant symbols. In the delicate collage "Farewell, Sweet Bird of Youth," a yellow-and-black winged bird is stuck in a pale-blue window frame, unable to fly. On one side there's a green tree, its roots bare, and on the other a black woman with her head bowed. There's no freedom here, and even nature receives no nurture. Through these exquisitely made works, she insists we reevaluate our historical past and open her eyes to how it resonates today. **[Valerie Gladstone]**
**Through Dec. 23, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 24 W. 57th St., 212-247-0082.**

"As the Crow Flies," by Betye Saar.

### A Passion for Form: Sculpture and Works on Paper by William Zorach

Before he had turned 30, William Zorach had performed on stage, designed sets, published poetry and, most memorably, exhibited his Fauvism-inspired paintings in the 1913 Armory Show. But by his mid-thirties he had turned almost exclusively to sculpture. He dedicated his last several decades to carving and casting the sinuously earthy figures and animals for which he is celebrated today.

The sculptor, however, continued to draw and work in watercolor as a respite from sculpting. His efforts in these very different media—on delicate paper and in weighty bronze, stone and wood—are currently on view in Gerald Peters' installation of over 40 works.

The sculptures flirt with various modernist styles: the geometric forms of Art Deco, the faceted modeling of Cubism and, especially, the rounding masses of his friend Gaston Lachaise. But pervading all his work is an affection for elegant stylizations and intimately worked surfaces. Among the most compelling sculptures is the bronze "Male Cat," with ruffs of fur muscularly pacing a drawn-back pose, finalized in the horizontals of half-closed eyes and flattening ears. It suggests, vividly, an aesthetic midway between that of ancient Egypt and the Arts and Crafts movement. Exotic subjects, in fact, seem to have particularly inspired the artist, because the hunching poses and furrowed faces of a pair of 1943 bronze reliefs of tigers are especially striking; the bronze "Grouper" wondrously captures the determination of a fish in its mute, tapering bulk.

Although touching in their subject matter—a number tenderly depict his children—some of the figure sculptures are less alert to the powers of rhythmic interval. At times one's eye arrives rather indifferently, instead of with anticipation, at the details of a heavyset head or hand. (By comparison, the sculptures of Matisse or Lipchitz move authoritatively from larger gestures to the resolve of detail.) But this isn't always the case: the robust, columnar pairing of torsos in the walnut sculpture "Gemini" is eloquently contained and completed, above finely carved faces, by a loop of upraised arms.

Some of Zorach's works in watercolor—that most ephemeral of media—reveal no less gravity of rhythm. While some depicting stylized flowers are intentionally decorative (and perhaps related to the tapestries produced by his wife Marguerite), in one watercolor from 1929 her standing form—a pillar of pure paper-white among slightly darker washes—expansively fills the height of the paper. Dark notes of hair and a single cast shadow lend character and weight to larger forms; the result is a domestic scene whose serene inhabitants have the inextricable life-force of lions, fish and cats. **[John Goodrich]**
**Through Dec. 17, Gerald Peters Gallery, 24 E. 78th St., 212-628-9760.**

### Mika Rottenberg: Squeeze

The problem with *Squeeze*, a video by Mika Rottenberg at the West 24th Street outpost of Mary Boone Gallery, is that it's better than it has any right to be. Or maybe it's that the film's crafting surpasses its narrative and symbolic trajectory. Perhaps it's that Rottenberg has yet to outgrow the icky fascinations typical of an adolescent mindset. Whatever: *Squeeze* is arresting and nettlesome entertainment.

Rottenberg possesses genuine cinematic flair. It's the rare video artist who acknowledges the role played by the camera. No numbing, point-and-shoot documentation for Rottenberg: *Squeeze* evinces a knowing eye for movement, texture, composition, color, set design and especially sound. Not that she allows much leeway to appreciate them in terms of form: The film is too caught up in wildly contrived grotesqueries to encourage aesthetic distance.

Food, sex and the assembly line are Rottenberg's motifs. The chief setting is a factory that is equal parts M.C. Escher, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and blue-collar cliché. Clownish, rash-riddled figures are literally squeezed for their juices. A pathetic, wiggling tongue is trapped within a wall; the same goes for an array of condensation-soaked buttocks. Claustrophobia is the rule, as is nightmarish camp. The body and its products are indistinguishable from nourishment. It's as if *Eraserhead* were cast with the misfits from *Pink Flamingos* and then choregraphed by Matthew Barney.

So, what's it all about? The press release goes on about "the mechanisms by which value is generated... the logistics of global outsourcing and the alchemy of art." A kind of alchemy, anyway: The end result of Rottenberg's factory is a compressed cube of *putreact*—at the entrance to *Squeeze*, there's a photo of the thing being held by, yes, Mary Boone. But would that Rottenberg's fascinations bedeviled rather than preoccupied her. Then, maybe the film would embody the visionary rather than indulge in artifice. *Squeeze* is enough of a near-miss to make you wonder if Rottenberg knows the difference. **[MN]**
**Through Dec. 18, Mary Boone Gallery, 541 W. 24th St., 212-752-2929.**

### James Hamilton: You Should Have Heard Just What I Seen

Is there any photographic subject that draws people more than celebrities? Even nature usually takes a back seat. But there are pictures and there are masterpieces, and photographer James Hamilton creates portraits of famous musical performers that reveal their souls. It is easy to see the influence of his heroes Diane Arbus and Eugene Smith. Over the past four decades, he shot for the early music magazine *Crawdaddy!*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Rolling Stone* and *The New York Observer*, covering every music craze, including rock, punk, disco and hip-hop. He also worked with filmmakers George A. Romero, Francis Ford Coppola, Wes Anderson and Noah Baumbach as the on-set photographer. Amazingly, this is his first gallery exhibition. It's a wonderful opportunity to discover works that illuminate a major aspect of our contemporary culture. You can even take them home with you by buying his recently published book.

It's hard to know where to start. Sweet-faced Dusty Springfield appears in her dressing room, hair tousled, with a bemused expression on her face. James Brown is ready to rock, his jaw set, eyes hidden behind dark glasses, his hips about to swivel. The Ramones also hide behind dark glasses and shaggy hair, looking like little kids trying to be tough. One of the loveliest is of Muddy Waters, a great, knowing smile on his face. And there's scary-looking Mick Jagger, his rib cage more prominent than his lips. They make you miss the wildness, the eccentricity and the talent, and put into focus the fun, the danger and the seductiveness of music. **[VG]**
**Through Dec. 23, K.S. Art, 73 Leonard St., 212-219-9918.**

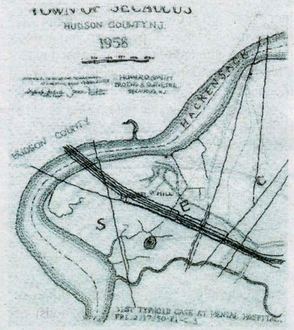
### Heather L. Johnson: Erasure

Heather L. Johnson's installation of embroideries, watercolors and a text-based wall drawing brings back to life the horrors that took place in the insane asylums and penitentiaries that existed in Hudson County, N.J., in the late 19th century. Allowed to exist because of political corruption and indifference, these institutions served as torture chambers for the weak, disenfranchised and mentally incompetent.

She believes that these places and the people who suffered in them should not be forgotten, and has spent years digging into archives to uncover their histories. By using this archival material as part of her works, she gives them extraordinary emotional immediacy.

"207 Acres" is a map of an "Asylum for the Insane." Johnson has outlined in linen thread the places where the buildings, roads and fences once existed, which appear innocent until looked at closely. Simply by bringing these places back into our consciousness, she reminds us not only of them but all the other places we've chosen to forget where terrible things have happened. The same is true of "Terra Incognita," which bears two inscriptions: "Ward No. 1 for Women" and "Animal Bones Picked Clean."

It doesn't take much imagination to populate the rooms outlined in the diagram with the inmates, who probably had no way to contest their incarceration. One of them might have been the subject of "Mug Shot," a watercolor of a round-faced woman, one eye bruised and closed, her expression resigned. In the small, finely drawn watercolors, Johnson provides us with the details of these terrible places, such as "Hallways and Chairs," "Dead End" and "Fence," carefully constructing a world that, thanks to her, will now stay in our memory. **[VG]**
**Through Dec. 12, Christina Ray Gallery, 30 Grand St., 212-334-0204.**




"No31," by Heather L. Johnson.