

ARTS & LETTERS

By JOHN GOODRICH

Devoted gallery-goers are familiar with the subcurrent of works in the contemporary art scene that revel in images of exotic violence, usually accompanied by gallery literature describing them as investigations of societal attitudes or our own deepest yearnings and anxieties. "Fall Guys and Zeitgeists" is subtler than many such shows. Instead of hinting darkly at our psychic condition, Donald Owen Colley's tightly crafted images examine the inner life of someone else: It just so happens that someone is a carnival employee who dreams about dismemberment and torch-wielding mobs.

**DONALD OWEN COLLEY:
FALL GUYS AND ZEITGEISTS**
George Adams Gallery

EYE CONTACT
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

ANNE PERETZ
Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

The artist's talents are many, and he seems intent on showing them all here. He constructed the black, starkly ornate frames that adorn most of the 20 works. A good many are executed in ceramic glazes on tiles — a medium normally not conducive to realistic rendering. Several images are meticulously incised in scratchboard. (Remember that stiff paper with the black, scratchable coating?) On the gallery desk stands a handsome metal-and-wood lamp, also fashioned by the artist.

By far the earliest work here, the large painting "Waiting 4 the Muzez" (1984) depicts Batman and several other superheroes bursting into a room with weapons blazing, presumably to rescue a boxer with arms bound behind his back and a toaster for a head. A row of audience members — stands in for gallery visitors, perhaps — watch from the lower edge, entertained by these goings-on but oblivious to the several dozen real-life darts piercing the canvas's perimeter.

Like much comic book-inspired art, this painting seems to revel simultaneously in excess and obscurantism. The more recent "Welcome Back Jack" (2003) shows more control of tone,



Donald Owen Colley, "Waiting 4 the Muzez" (1984).

GEORGE ADAMS GALLERY

though here the humor of a clown's ghoulish grin, enhanced by luridly colored ceramic glazes and a "Goth" picture frame, might be best appreciated by horror-movie buffs.

Mr. Colley's efforts are most effective when he tries less hard. The artist is a virtuoso at rendering volumes, and in the scratchboard work "Calling of the Falls" (2005) his crisp, white cross-hatching on the inky background lends the picturesque scene of three men clinging to a single barrel in mid-river a "retro," faux-engraved look. Yet there is also a genuine spookiness — a moonlit atmosphere that seems both chaste and fraught.

The most inventive pieces here may well be three smallest pen-and-ink drawings covered on both sides (seemingly without forethought) with fragments of cartoons, anatomical sketches, conventional drawings of cowboys, and neat, cryptic bits of text. Amid one clutter of figures, the countenance of George W. Bush peers from beneath a prairie wife's bonnet; above appears the word "Chapstick."

What does it mean? Who knows? What appears in these drawings is their immediacy. Gone for a moment is the sensitively planned sadism of his more elaborate works. In its place is something more interesting — the raw

searchings of a fertile, unsettled mind.

More of an intriguing mix than a survey of American portraiture, "Eye Contact" reflects Michael Rosenfeld's own concentration on pre-World War II movements such as Social Realism, Surrealism, and African-American art from the same era. There's barely a hint of postwar trends — of de Kooning's "Woman" series, for instance, or the various responses of Lichtenstein, Katz, and Close to mass-produced images. For a show subtitled "Painting and Drawing in American Art," a good part of the work may seem derivative of European models.

Still, there's much to appreciate. Who would have thought that an Alice Neel portrait would stand out as an upholder of traditional painting? Yet her keen feel for subtle ochres and blues lends rock-solid conviction to the undulating forms of "Call Me Joe" (1955).

Alongside, very dissimilar portraits by Archibald J. Motley Jr. and Fairfield Porter both seem earnest, if somewhat inert. (Sneak a peek at Bob Thompson's self-portrait in the office for a more compelling use of Porter's semi-abstracted color planes.)

In the gallery's smaller room, paintings by William H. Johnson and Norman Lewis glow with energetic hues and

crisp geometric patterns. No more than a few broad stabs of paint, Lester Johnson's head captures complex volumes with remarkable delicacy. The biggest surprise of all is a slashing, Soutine-like self-portrait by Louise Nevelson. Vigorous color and the brushwork of this painting from the mid-1930s, so buoyant compared to her meditative sculptures, are reason enough to drop by.

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In some circles, a predilection for luminously scenic landscapes could be injurious to a reputation — all the more so when the painter favors mist-wrapped sites and a quietly expressionistic technique. In Anne Peretz's recent paintings of New Zealand and Massachusetts shores, however, her earnestness seems directed towards goals much more interesting than the picturesque.

Ms. Peretz's Zen-like simplification of motifs isn't just a pose: Raw but subtle pressures of color work from within to give a palpable presence to forms — the spreading foreground dunes of "Truro Dune #10," for instance, or the crowding, teetering posts that stare back from the foggy mid-distance of "Pilings #4." In "Milford Sound #3," the drawing's rhythm is so understated as to seem almost subliminal. Yet their rigor can be felt in the tiers of ochres and greens that cohere powerfully into the drama of a huge bluff.

Not every painting has such vital rhythms, and Ms. Peretz continually risks sentimentality. But in her pursuit of deeper appearances, the artist seems unconcerned about superficial ones. Many contemporary artists telegraph their intensity through shocking techniques or images, and here it's bracing to see colors and forms allowed — trusted — to speak for themselves. After all, this may be the biggest gamble of all.

Colley until June 10 (41 W. 57th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, 212-644-5665). Prices: \$3,500-\$25,000.

Eye Contact until August 5 (24 W. 57th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, 212-247-0082). Prices: The gallery declined to disclose its prices.

Peretz until July 1 (20 E. 79th Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues, 212-879-6606). Prices: The gallery declined to disclose its prices.