

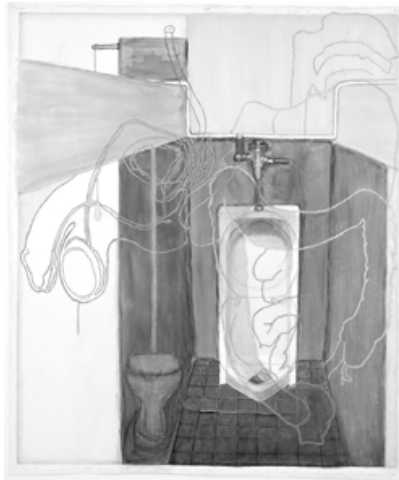
Jo Baer

by Carrie Moyer

Alexander Gray Associates April 4 - May 12, 2007

One of the most surprising aspects of Jo Baer's 1983 refutation of Minimalism, "I am no longer an abstract artist," is her insistence on the intrinsic relationship between illusionism and art. Often regarded as one of the very few *painters* allowed into the church of Minimalism, Baer is most well known in this country for a body of elegant, hard-edge paintings produced in the 1960s. With a set of sixteen canvases called *Primary Light Group* from 1964, Baer takes on Greenberg's figure/ground fetish with a resounding severity: gleaming, "empty" white fields are hemmed in by black frames that run the literal edge of the canvas. Seemingly identical, a closer look at each painting reveals thin bands of electric color between the black and white paint, confounding the designation of figure or ground to either color.

While a few works from the early '60s used more complex compositions, by and large Baer's painting belonged to what Lawrence Alloway termed "One Image Art." Anomalous works, such as "Black Star" and "African Flag," seem to draw as much from heraldry as they do from Minimalism and strongly evoke the paintings of John Wesley, her husband at the time. After a decade of demanding a kind of experiential awe from the viewer, by the early '70s Baer had loosened up both the composition and physicality of her work. The so-called "Radiator" paintings often contained fluid, sweeping gestures that suggested a new, more biomorphic referent. These body-sized paintings are characterized by a singular image that actually wraps all the way around the face of the canvas and onto the deep, 4-inch profile of the stretchers. The narrow, rectangular slabs were hung extremely low on the wall, so as to hover over the floor.



Jo Baer, "Shrine of the Piggies (The Pigs Hog It All and Defecate and Piss on Where From They Get It and With Whom They Will Not Share. That's It.)" 2001. Oil on canvas. 72" x 60-3/4". Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

Having been featured in a slew of history-making exhibitions, including Alloway's Systematic Painting at the Guggenheim and *10* at the Dwan Gallery (both 1966), Baer was the subject of a mid-career survey at the Whitney in 1975. That year she left New York City for Ireland, ultimately settling in Amsterdam some years later. Just as the artist's move from the capital of the art market to "old" Europe signaled a change in the intention of her painting, Baer's rejection of abstraction and embrace of



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FEATURED CONTRIBUTOR

David Levi Straus

David Levi Strauss is the author of *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (2003), *The Fighting Is a Dance, Too: Leon Golub & Nancy Spero* (2000), *Between Dog & Wolf: Essays on Art and Politics* (1999), *Broken Wings: The Legacy of Landmines* (1998) and a book of poems, *Manoeuvres* (1980).

His essays and reviews appear regularly in *Artforum* and *Aperture* and he has written exhibition catalogues and monographs on the work of numerous artists, including Martin Puryear, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Carolee Schneeman, Alfredo Jaar, Miguel Rio Branco, Mike Bidlo, Raoul Hague and Robert Frank, Tim Davis, and Daniel Martinez.

David studied poetics at New College in San Francisco, is a founding editor of *ACTS: A Journal of New Writing* (1982-90) and editor of *A Book of Correspondences for Jack Spicer* (1987). He was also a recipient of the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in writing in 2003-04 and is on the faculty of the Center for Curatorial Studies and Art in Contemporary Culture at Bard College.

Read his latest article "[Magic & Images / Images & Magic](#)" in the current issue of The Brooklyn Rail.

“radical figuration” (her term) parallels Minimalism’s waning influence and the advent of Neo-Expressionism. By softening the weight and touch of the drawing and color, Baer filled the spare canvases that she once called “extremely negative” with image fragments and even recognizable forms.

Given the fact that Baer’s earlier abstractions can be seen regularly in important US collections and that both her transitional and wholly figurative paintings are largely unknown to American viewers, to find four recent canvases in a Chelsea gallery is akin to catching a glimpse of the Yeti. One is first struck by how completely idiosyncratic these works are and how distant from any hint of geometric abstraction. Instead of hyper-dimensional stretchers, the canvases have been roughly cut right up to the edge of the image and affixed directly to the wall. The fact that their milky surfaces are utterly flush with the wall makes them look more like light-emitting skins than traditional paintings.

Two very large paintings dating from 1990-91, “Of a Fearful Symmetry (Bound Hand and Foot)” and “At the Back of the North Wind,” bear a knowing resemblance to cave paintings, with their wide-open compositions, multiple narratives and thin, earthy washes of pigment. Lightly drawn animals such as stags, wolves, bison, rats, and even flamingos commingle inside a pale flurry of human handprints that take the viewer back to Lascaux and the genesis of painting. An incongruent collection of human fragments, including the silhouette of a hanging black man, an entwined pair of ballet dancers, Native American shaman, the shiny black boots of a Gestapo commandant as well as a surfeit of male and female genitalia, propel the work forward in time. The space of Baer’s “radical figuration” is a collaged and illogical accretion of forms in which neither positive nor negative shapes gain dominance.

The two most recent paintings, from 2000-01, “Testament to the Powers that Be (Where Trees Turn to Sand, Residual Colours Stain the Lands)” and “Shrine to the Piggies (The Pigs Hog It All and Defacate and Piss on Where From They Get It and With Whom They Will Not Share. That’s It.),” are more richly colored and traditionally illusionistic in their use of perspective. Though their layering evokes Picabia’s “transparencies,” Baer invents her own opaque iconography that brings to mind Jasper Johns or Marcel Duchamp. Frequent allusions to the power inequities between humans (men vs. women, the corporate state vs. the citizen, and art history vs. individual artist) seem to be embedded in Baer’s epic titles as well as her fascination with man-made systems of control, particularly those that harness or channel the power of water. Images of dams, urinals and toilets, diagrams of male “plumbing” (and perhaps even the “radiators” of her earlier paintings) all point to an interest in the visual manifestation of larger cultural and/or historical predispositions in the most quotidian of details.

Contemporary critical discourse perhaps programs us into the binary compulsion to compare and contrast. The elegant appeal (and current market embrace) of high Modernist design as accessorized by hard-edge geometric painting have placed Baer’s later figurative works at a disadvantage—a fact that Baer herself presaged in her public rejection of abstraction and Minimalism in 1983. Of her paintings from the 1960s, the artist famously stated: “There is no hierarchy. There is no ambiguity. There is no illusion.” So while she continues to reject hierarchy as a

picture-making strategy, illusion and ambiguity have become extremely important to Baer's work. Throughout her practice as an artist, Baer has had an abiding interest in how the human body experiences the two-dimensional plane. However different in their facture and intent, both the early and late paintings demand the viewer's physical presence to fully experience them. Reproductions of her work are unavoidably frustrating, which seems to confirm that the experience of close looking is unphotographable.

Jo Baer came of age during a time in which painting seemed to require some declaration or manifesto to justify its existence. Once intellectual precedent had been publicly established, the painter would do well to stick to her guns and not stray too far, either conceptually or formally. However, like Lee Lozano, the ideas and experiences that drive Baer's art are too large and varied to be restricted to a single form. The sighting of the Yeti is a magical thing. It reminds us that it is an artist's prerogative to change, to discontinue the manufacture of the "products" for which she became known, and to take off on an "open adventure."

—Carrie Moyer

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