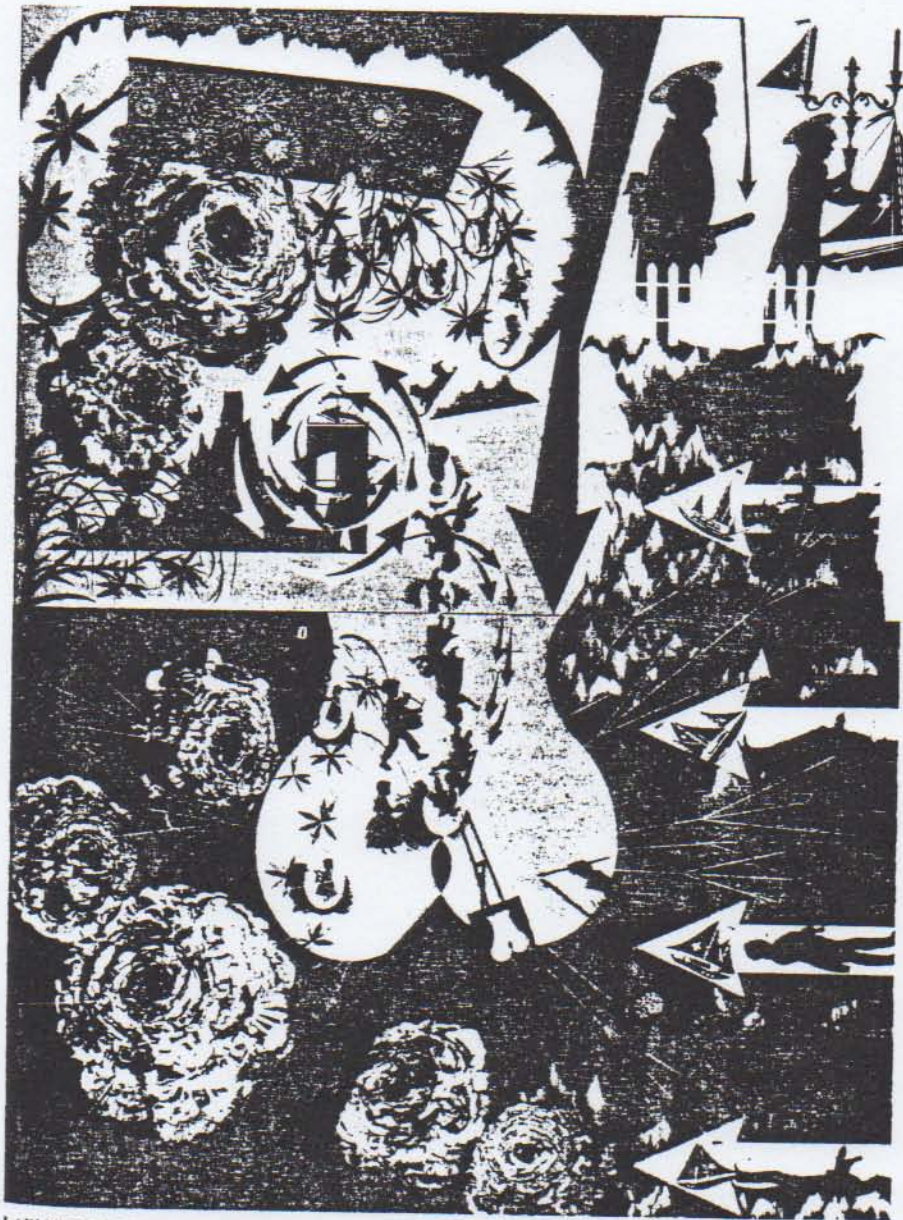


PAINTING CAMP

THE SUBCULTURE OF PAINTING

THE MAINSTREAM OF DECORATION

TERRY R. MYERS



LARI PITTMAN, THIS EXPEDITION, BELOVED AND DESPISED, CONTINUES REGARDLESS, 1989-90. ACRYLIC AND ENAMEL ON MAHOGANY PANEL, 128 X 96". PHOTO DOUGLAS M. PARKER STUDIO, COURTESY ROSAMUND FELSEN, LOS ANGELES.

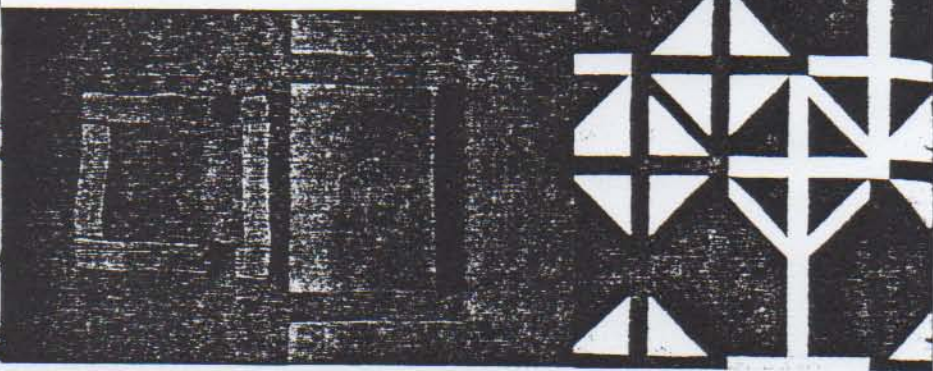
The claim that Wayne Koestenbaum makes in his groundbreaking consideration of opera, homosexuality, and desire, that "It's more sublime and more camp to keep quiet about joy and then rescue the story later, once everyone else has abandoned it,"¹ provides a point of departure from which it is possible to think about painting as a "sub-cultural" activity, one which takes place determinedly within the context of a peculiar type of ill-defined yet strangely available "mainstream" that we insist on calling the "decorative," no matter if we mean it derivatively or not. It is of little consequence that in quantitative terms, painting still occupies a sizeable space in current art practice: for ages considered to be one of the most canonical mediums of "high" culture, it is now thought by many to be nearly irrelevant to those issues considered valuable in art. I submit that it is precisely this position of presumed deficiency which has helped to re-open tremendous space in which certain types of practice in painting can indeed be *productive*: "... it may be the only visual art form today capable of withstanding attempts to make works of art prescriptive and readily obtainable, if only because it is such an alien life form in our current culture: paintings don't move, don't talk back, and don't take up floor space, and we'll probably never know quite what to do with them."²

Anyone well-versed these days in the "theatrics" of painting's theoretical discourse over the past few centuries should recognize the promise of Koestenbaum's queer pairing of the "sublime" and "camp": a juxtaposition which furnishes an opportunity to consider the "decorative" in the work of some painters as a deliberately meaningful activity and/or property which remains fully operational even after it enters the mainstream. Indexing a provocative (whether conceptual or physical) relationship which works as nicely for painting as it does for opera (another "dead" art form), it goes without saying that the uniting of these terms also provides space for new dialogues concerning problems underlying the social construction of homosexuality (by "us" as well as "them") — particularly in the United States.

Returning to the margins of painting, I am interested here in making a more sweeping argument in support of what I perceive to be a newly motivated and essentially *joyous* approach to painting in the work of several important American artists who work willfully in a mode which is "camp" and "sublime" in both sensibility and intention. These artists — Mary Heilmann, Jim Isermann, Lari Pittman, Kay Rosen, and Thomas Trosch — participate in the overall discourse in such a fashion in order to redefine themselves and their work directly in the face of the economics and politics of the dominant ideologies at work in all levels of culture — "high," "popular," or otherwise.³ What they are giving us has extraordinary significance: "rescuing" the "story" of painting after (almost) everyone else has "abandoned" it.



ybody



these artists offer something which may very well be (in the mainstream sense) a new-sublime, one which is unwilling, or better yet unable, to be oppressive in the same manner found in the notorious tradition of many of its ideological predecessors, right up to the last (formalist) one which ruled like a seemingly benevolent dictator over high modernism.

A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.
— Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "What Is a Minor Literature?"⁴

Deleuze and Guattari's work is reasonably familiar in the current discourse of art; with that said, it remains necessary in this context to recall precisely those things which they determined to be the three characteristics of a "minor" language: "the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of annunciation."⁵ I want to suggest that the painters discussed here "deterritorialize" such things as the camp sensibility and/or the sublime (which raises the point that at least in theory no one cultural group has any exclusive rights over such thoughts or feelings), while demonstrating that their most meaningful gestures ("acts" is a better word) are essentially political and ultimately collective: as a representative sampling of some sort of "whole," their work redistributes power in terms of what will be granted the right to be constructive, as well as "mainstream."

I have argued previously in these pages for a consideration of the paintings of Mary

Heilmann as literal documents of the "everyday."⁶ Heilmann's paintings "work" in the productive sense of the term as if they punched a time clock. Process-driven, yet perfectly able to cast off any associations of painterly "touch" in favor of a much more rigorous display of a "workman-like" movement of paint across often distinctly shaped panels, her paintings present themselves unabashedly — but only at first glance — as formal in the most dispassionate of fashions. Having an attitude toward style quite similar to that frequently at play in fashion itself,⁷ Heilmann handles her paintings like designers do garments, or, for that matter, like divas do a libretto, particularly when any of these artifacts are read (by either the producer or the consumer) as camp: "When we experience the camp rush, the delight, the savor, we are making a private airline of lost cultural matter, fragments held hostage by *everyone else's indifference*. No one else lived for this gesture, this pattern, this figure, before: only I know that it is sublime."⁸

In terms of actual "product," Jim Isermann's work provides for the "sublime" in the space of its own camp sensibility at a level rarely matched in contemporary painting, precisely because the boundaries of the medium become much more loose in relation to the actual materials of his work, while remaining utterly rigorous in relation to both conception and process.⁹ In its use of materials with a long — and quite sincere — history of the handmade, Isermann's work embodies the notion of a "work-ethic" alluded to in Andrew Ross's statement that, "In liberating the objects and discourses of the past from disdain and neglect, camp generates its own kind of economy. Camp,

in this respect, is the *re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor*."¹⁰ Moreover, the artist's own statement: "I think of my own work as coming out of the way I grew up — it's me sorting through *what I didn't get and what I want*"¹¹, does not allow us to forget once again painting's current situation as a "subcultural" practice which hasn't even come close to giving some of us everything we want, need, and deserve.¹²

Lari Pittman's paintings aggressively utilize a highly styled narrative mode, revitalizing specific images to tell stories which refuse to succumb to the trivialization they may in fact have suffered previously. Pittman's work should be understood in the context provided in Ross's point about the "corporate-state" legislation of the actions of subcultural groups during the AIDS crisis: "Perhaps this is where the question of camp, which was often posed as an embarrassment to post-Stonewall gay culture... becomes political all over again, because camp contains an explicit commentary on feats of *survival* in a world dominated by the taste, interests, and definitions of others."¹³ Demanding that his work be conceptually "available" to *all* of us through a pointed use of decorative motifs from variously-dated historical periods as well as from distinct forms of institutional signs and symbols, Pittman proves that the decorative can be essential, as much as the essential can be decorative, particularly as either of them become a feature of the mainstream.

Kay Rosen "has for some time demonstrated in her work a breathtaking sensitivity not only to the dexterity of the languages which she manipulates, but also to those



marginalized groups in society which turn to a like-minded co-opting and reworking of labels to make themselves both — and this is very important — seen and heard.”¹⁴ She understands how language can function as decoration, not in the extraneous, but in the commemorative sense of the term. Her sophisticated visual and linguistic plays on words are double whammies, not only due to their very complicated relationship with our current notions of painting which remain essentially formal(ist), but also because of what should be read as their fundamentally feminist punch against the patrilineage of language and painting. The wonderful irritation that Rosen’s work provokes is thoroughly and rigorously camp in a manner that someone like Scott Long would surely celebrate in the terms of his discussion of the form/content problem as it affects the “spectator” of camp: “The unity the observer finds is not the formal unity which bourgeois criticism seeks (a camp aesthetic necessarily mocks formalism, does not respect the separation between the art object and the ‘real’ world of content and contradiction): it is a different unity, dialectical in that it emerges from a conflict of values.”¹⁵

Thomas Trosch’s paintings probably are the most blatantly camp presented here; however, it is important not to assume that their overt display of a “classic” sensibility diminishes the substantial conceptual subtleties of the work — in other words, this artist confirms that even at its most flamboyant, camp remains serious. Depicting stage-like scenarios in which mostly women, but sometimes men, socialize in the presence of assorted abstract paintings and sculptures as well as objets d’art, Trosch’s outrageously painted can-

vases also have speech bubbles which usually contain text taken from such varied sources as Japanese or decorating lessons. The tension that is palpable and quintessentially camp in Trosch’s work comes from what is an admiration for the history of abstraction on one hand, and on the other an uncanny knowledge of how it often “works” in the homes of those who purchase it, due to what Ross calls “...the necrophilic economy which underpins the camp sensibility, not only in its amorous resurrection of deceased cultural forms, but also in its capacity to promise immortality to the tastemaking intellect.”¹⁶ Not merely rescuing abandoned cultural forms for their own subcultural use within their rigid framing edges, Trosch’s paintings — like each of these artists — have the potential to liberate the viewer as well.

Camp — even at its most pessimistically conceived — still asseverates a kind of hope: it is a system of signs by which those who understand certain ironies will recognize each other and endure. It is a private language for some who intuit that public language has gone wrong.

— Scott Long, *The Loneliness of Camp*¹⁷

The discourses which particularly oppress all of us lesbians, women, and homosexual men are those discourses which take for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality. These discourses speak about us and claim to say the truth in an apolitical field, as if anything of that which signifies could escape the political in this moment of history, and as if in what concerns us, politically insignificant signs could exist.

LEFT TO RIGHT:

THOMAS TROSCH, D. RODGER’S DEC.#5, 1993, OIL AND GRAPHITE ON LINEN, 84 X 70”. COURTESY JOSE FREIRE, NEW YORK.

(TOP) KAY ROSEN, Y’D BODY, 1993, ENAMEL SIGN PAINT ON CANVAS, 16 X 24”. COURTESY FEATURE, NEW YORK.

(BOTTOM) MARY HEILMANN, RED, YELLOW, AND BLUE KNOT, 1979, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 19 X 12”. COURTESY PAT HEARN, NEW YORK.

JIM ISERMANN, UNTITLED, 1993, HAND PIECED FABRIC WALL HANGING, 72 X 72”. COURTESY FEATURE, NEW YORK. PHOTO PETER MUSCATO.

LARI PITTMAN, A DECORATED CHRONOLOGY OF INSISTENCE AND RESIGNATION, UNTITLED # 16, ACRYLIC, ENAMEL, GLITTER ON PANEL, 84 X 60”. COURTESY ROSAMUND FELSEN, LOS ANGELES.

JIM ISERMANN, UNTITLED, 1993, HAND PIECED FABRIC WALL HANGING, 73 X 73”.

— Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*¹⁸

It should be clear by now that what we are dealing with here is the basic desire for survival, which I would argue is embodied in the work of these artists as the necessary component of what becomes a more inclusive type of “sublime.” All of their work helps me believe that painting will endure (whether or not we think that it functions like a subcultural practice), particularly when it recognizes its capabilities for contributing to the culture at large without compromising its particular “voice,” as is the case with all of these artists whose work collectively resists any and all attempts to trivialize and/or depoliticize what are singular and worthwhile accomplishments. ■

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FRUIT DISH

THOMAS TROSCH, DOROTHY RODGERS'S DECORATING LESSON #2, 1992, OIL ON LINEN, 76 X 60". COLLECTION MARCIA MAY, TEXAS.

KAY ROSEN, STILL LIFE, 1993, ENAMEL SIGN PAINT ON CANVAS, 17.5 X 23".

Notes

- Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), p. 117. My thanks to Laura Cottingham for directing me to David Deitcher's earlier reference to this tantalizing book (in his response to the 1993 Whitney Biennial, "Queens in the Reading Room," *Artforum*, May 1993, pp. 13-14).
- Taken from my text, "Painting'd Better Work," written to accompany an exhibition of the work of Susan Wanklyn at 55 Mercer, New York, June 1993.
- Andrew Ross, in his intelligent analysis of camp, asserts that "The pseudo-aristocratic patrilineage of camp can hardly be understated. Consider the etymological provenance of the three most questionable categories of American cultural taste: schlock, kitsch, and camp. None are directly of Anglo origin, and it is clear, from their cultural derivation, where they belong on the scale of prestige: *Schlock*, from Yiddish (literally, 'damaged goods' at a cheap price), *Kitsch*, from German, petty bourgeois for pseudo-art, and *Camp*, more obscurely from the French *se camper* (to posture or to flaunt), but with a history of English upper-class usage. From "Uses of Camp," in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989, p. 145).
- Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "What Is a Minor Literature?" published in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); reprinted in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, edited by Russell Ferguson et al. (New York and Cambridge, MA: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 1990), p. 59.
- Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.
- See "Mary Heilmann," *Flash Art*, no. 150 (January/February 1990), p. 132; and "Mary Heilmann, Jack Pierson, Jessica Stockholder," *Flash Art*, no. 167 (November/December 1992), pp. 98-99.
- Heilmann often has borrowed from fashion in terms of visual as well as conceptual "material": for example, David Joselit reminds us of Heilmann's paintings from the late seventies based on the pink and black of new wave clothing, "Mary Heilmann's Embodied Grids," in *Mary Heilmann: A Survey* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1990).
- Koestenbaum, p. 117, emphasis mine.
- The chronology of Isermann's work since at least the mid-eighties is telling: from traditionally constructed paintings of culturally fugitive decorative motifs (primarily the "flowerpower" designs of the sixties); to paintings literally split vertically, horizontally, or diagonally into equal parts paint and hooked rug (the "Shag Paintings"); to artsy-craftsy-inspired reworkings of that-most-sublime-of-kitsch, stained glass; to the present

- quilts, collectively named — and labeled each with a "designer" label sewn on the back — "Handiwork."
- Ross, p. 151.
- Holland Cotter, "Eight Artists Interviewed," *Art in America*, May 1987, p. 166.
- It is misleading to suggest, as Jim Lewis has, that Isermann's statement "sounds like the kind of self-infantilization that would render his shag-rug paintings less informative than self-indulgent." ("Homeboys," *Artforum*, October 1991, p. 105.). Nothing about Isermann's work suggests that he is acting like a child.
- Ross, p. 144.
- This is taken from my "Kay Rosen," *Blocnotes*, no. 5 (Winter 1994), pp. 68-69.
- Scott Long, "The Loneliness of Camp," in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, edited by David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 89. This essay first appeared as "Useful Laughter: Camp and Seriousness," *Southwest Review* 74 (Winter 1989).
- Ross, p. 152.
- Long, p. 90.
- Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," originally published in *Feminist Issues*, Summer 1980; reprinted in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, edited by Russell Ferguson et al. (New York and Cambridge, MA: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 1990), p. 53.

Jim Isermann was born in 1955 in Kenosha, Wisconsin. He lives in Santa Monica, California.

Selected solo shows: 1981: Mizuno, Los Angeles; 1982: Artists Space, New York; 1984: Kuhlenschmidt, Los Angeles; 1988: Bbaer, New York; Feature, New York; 1992: Boyd, Santa Monica; Feature, New York; 1994: Telles, Los Angeles; Feature, New York.

Selected group shows: 1980: "The Young/The Restless," Otis/Parsons, Los Angeles; 1981: "The Fix-It-Up Show," LACE, Los Angeles; 1986: "A Southern California Collection," Cimus, Los Angeles; 1987: "L.A. Hot & Cool," MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts; "CalArts: Skeptical Belief(s)," Renaissance Society, Chicago; 1987: "Avantgarde in the 80s," LACMA, Los Angeles; 1988: "LA CA Boys," Feature, Chicago; 1991: "Presenting Rearwards," Felsen, Los Angeles; 1992: 1993: "Projet unité," Unité d'Habitation, Firminy; 1994: "Tom Friedman, Jim Isermann, Jennifer Pastor," Telles, Los Angeles.

Lari Pittman was born in Los Angeles, in 1952, where he lives.

Selected solo shows: 1982: Newport Harbor Art

Museum, Newport Beach; LACE, Los Angeles; 1983/84/85/87/88/89/90/91/93: Rosamund Felsen, Los Angeles; 1992: Gorney, New York; Jablonka, Cologne; 1994: Rosamund Felsen, New York.

Selected group shows: 1977: "100 Current Directions....," ICA, Los Angeles; 1983: "Los Angeles/New York Exchange," Artists Space, New York; 1987: "CalArts: Skeptical Belief(s)," Renaissance Society, Chicago; "L.A. Hot & Cool, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Whitney Museum, New York; 1989: Prospect 89, Frankfurt; Biennial, Whitney Museum, New York; 1992: "Helter Skelter," MOCA, Los Angeles; "LAX," Krinzing, Vienna; "Viaggio a Los Angeles," Castello di Rivara, Turin; "Paul McCarthy, Lari Pittman, Jeffrey Vallance," Guenzani, Milan; 1993: Biennial, Whitney Museum, New York; Gorney, New York; "Drawing the Line Against AIDS," Guggenheim Museum, Venice; 1994: "don't look now," Thread Waxing Space, New York; "Arabesque," PPOW, New York.

Kay Rosen was born in Corpus Christi, Texas. She lives between Gary, Indiana, and New York.

Selected solo shows: 1979: Urdang, New York; 1980: Franklin Furnace, New York; 1984/87/88/89/90/92/93: : Feature, Chicago and New York; Broadway Windows Installation, New Museum, New York; 1990: Miro, London; Witte de With, Rotterdam; 1991: Wayne, Santa Monica; Shedhalle, Zurich; Hoffmann, Chicago; Carpenter, Santa Fe; 1993: Miro, London; 1994: MCA, Chicago; De Carlo, Milano.

Selected group shows: 1980: "New Dimensions: Time," MCA, Chicago, 1987: American Fine Arts, Co., New York; 1989: (with Group Material), AIDS Timeline, Matrix Gallery, Berkeley, CA (traveled); 1991: "AIDS Timeline," (with Group Material, Whitney Biennial, New York; "Are You a Boy or Are You a Girl?" Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT; "Tattoo Collection," Air de Paris, Nice (traveled); "Steven Evans, Michael Jenkins, Kay Rosen," Rosen, New York; 1993: "The Return of the Cadavre Exquis," The Drawing Center, New York (traveled); "Kay Rosen, Susan Silas," Freire, New York; "Legend in my Living Room," Rhona Hoffman, Chicago; 1994: "Korrespondenzen/Correspondence," Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin.

Thomas Trosch was born in 1955 in Baltimore, Maryland.

Solo shows: 1992: fiction/nonfiction, New York; 1993: Bloom, Santa Monica; 1994: Freire, New York.

Selected group shows: 1992: "Little Men and Little Women," White Columns, New York; 1993: "I Am the Enunciator," Thread Waxing Space, New York.