

This essay and this year of teaching Art and Critical Theory at VCU are dedicated to the memory of my friend, artist and teacher Morris Yarowsky.

Mapping the MFA Studio: Flow and Interchange in the First Year
by Paul Ryan
In Conjunction with exhibit, *The Old Grey Whistle Test, Plant Zero, Richmond VA*
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Introduction

One of the joys of teaching critical theory is the experience of sharing with students, through a variety of critical lenses, how visual art is an intellectual and philosophical discipline. Examining art and culture in the light of writers and thinkers like Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Jean Baudrillard, Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Rosiland Krauss, Clement Greenberg, Allan Kaprow, and others, swiftly sidelines or even puts to rest conventional beliefs like art as mere self-expression or therapy. Critical theory teaches us that art is complex, paradoxical, political, and never “pure.” And as the critic Terry Eagleton says in his recent book, *After Theory*, “[c]ulture’ is a slippery term, which can be either trivial or momentous.” The seven first-year graduate students in the Department of Painting and Printmaking for the 2005-06 academic year understand the difficulty of making and thinking about art. The artwork in this exhibition demonstrates their adroitness at working and playing in the studio where the intellect evolves and is expressed through the elasticity, surprises, and pleasure of the language of visual form. The students’ title for the show, *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, reveals a wit that is conscious of subjectivity in art (and graduate school) and a healthy equilibrium regarding the political and philosophical flux of the art world. This latter attribute, equilibrium or balance, is a term that, for me, perhaps best describes these seven students as a whole. Their group chemistry is a wonderful confluence of seriousness and fun, belief and doubt, struggle and achievement, intellect and emotion. And through it all is a wide looping stream of compassion and kindness. In short, they represent a wide creativity and a position of citizenship and ethics that the critics we have studied this year would esteem. It is truly a pleasure to work with these seven students.

The Artists and their Work

There is a complex ease in the paintings, prints, and “stacks” of **Jared Clark**, the smartness and surety of which evoke a curious uneasiness in the mind of the informed viewer. The fluid unity of Clark’s formal and conceptual solutions is sometimes too good to be true; yet, the variety and consistency of his aesthetic precision is convincing, telling the viewer to believe. Mining the aisles and shelves of thrift stores and yard sales, Clark is a collector of quirky household items and kitsch: toll paintings, cutting boards, souvenir and gift shop figurines. His uncanny ability to transform the fruit of his weekend gleanings into art hinges on his playful eye, and is anchored in an understanding of various issues within modernism. Despite his use of alternative materials and means of construction, Clark is adamant about his work existing as painting. This commitment guides his ideas and solutions. The results are poetic improvisations on advanced art through a “low” vocabulary – an aestheticization of found objects that simultaneously blurs and defines.

Demonstrating a flow of feminine -- not to be mistaken with feminist -- behavior and influence, **Lauren Clay’s** paper paintings are sculptural love letters, appropriately obscure in their devotion to figures and issues in popular culture and the art world. Comprised of two and three-dimensional curvilinear forms, rolls, and coils, her work references the female body and, more telling though indirectly so, the hair curls and curlers of a coy 1950s femininity. In a 1997 essay entitled *Feminine Wiles: Modern Art’s Fear of the Female*, critic Kathryn Hixson discusses modernism’s – particularly that of Greenbergian persuasion – suppression of the female. Hixson regards kitsch as essentially feminine, and she accuses Greenberg of “seeking to relegate female sensibility to the margins of bad taste.” Clay would agree with Hixson’s perceptions; yet, appreciating her own femininity and “motherly” characteristics, Clay is able to make this statement: “I find Greenberg’s narrative of art history sad but endearing.” Clay’s Marilyn Monroe-style empathy combined with knowledge of cultural theory allows her to playfully explore ironical overlappings in the terrain between high and low, feminine and masculine, and modernism and postmodernism. Her use of paper – carefully covered with flat applications of pastel acrylic paint – is significant: it is a fragile, pliable carrier of our most profound ideas and perceptions as well as the daily news and comics, which Clay observes, respectfully, with empathy and joy.

The paintings of **Jason Coates** flirt with the posthuman. His occasionally garbled scenarios harmlessly suggest the eerie tone of a cyborg culture, of futuristic fantasies such as downloading human consciousness into a computer, or the evolution of machines that enslave the human race. Possibilities of the posthuman have been described both in terms of terror and pleasure; and, Coates’ paintings embrace this uncertain combination, functioning essentially as non-apocalyptic abstractions of a posthuman future. A former freelance illustrator, Coates’ work is born through a symbiosis of graphic design and science fiction. His formal language and use of pictorial space veer toward a neo-cubist sensibility – their effects deriving from the pronouncements of airbrushing, masking tape, glittering surfaces, and a high key, slightly bitter palette. Coates’ is a cubism of cybernetics in contrast to that of the machine at the beginning of the 20th century.

If there were such a thing as an actual daily rag for the art world, **Mike Erickson** would be the staff editorial/political cartoonist. His sensibility as an artist dwells in that necessary mind-set introduced by Duchamp

and defined by Warhol, an outlook that exists as part of the public domain in the visual arts, and that is indispensable to the sobriety and health of a culture that swings towards earnest high seriousness and hierarchy. In other words, it is the approach of goosing art's priggish side. In his paintings, Erickson utilizes a "do-whatever-it-takes" approach to form. His vocabulary suggests a confluence of sympathetic indifference, sublime profanity, and dull precision – all underlain with a postmodernist *jouissance*. The work emerges from a determined craftsmanship that gets things done, often erasing the line between form and content.

Heather Harvey is interested in the overlap between her two chosen fields of study: archeology and art. Where the archeologist approaches physical form through subtraction, uncovering remnants of established forms that have been obscured by the elements and time, the artist's method is usually an originary or additive one. Yet, for both, form is always at hand, and the artist's additive processes usually include an uncovering – that of interpretation. For, it is rare that meaning for the artist, at least in a fuller sense, is preconceived. Form often leads the way, with interpretation sometimes following as a close collaborator, although its distance is sometimes desirable and even necessary. Harvey's near-monochromatic wall installations are 90° tableaux of peculiar puddle or splatter-like forms that contain hollow stalactites and/or stalagmites. These cylinders evoke the slow-motion sculptural effects of objects entering a liquid surface as an action of gravity, a vertically-oriented, downward force. Transferred to the wall these forms suggest a slight vertigo; and, there is a tension between motion/gesture and immobile form.

Andrew Kozlowski's works on paper represent an accretion of ideas signifying the interdependent relationship of art and philosophy, studio practice and theory, as well as their exclusivity of one another. His attitude about the world (and the art world) is one of devotion coexisting with the inevitable skepticism that accompanies informed insight. Kozlowski is drawn both to the way "life-like art" transcends art and the way "art-like art" transcends life; and, a healthy anxiety inscribes his prints and drawings, which have become a kind of journal. The work records his navigation of the dawning perception and paradox that art is, all at the same time, absolutely essential and absolutely unessential.

The figurative paintings of **Marian Smith** dwell at the precarious and classic boundary between individual psychology -- the reflections, fantasies, and evasions of interiority -- and the pressing outer logistics and oppressive status quo of daily life. They linger within what Donald Kuspit calls the "cult of the unconscious," which in art he sees sadly to be in a state of decline. Smith's work is conceived through a romanticist urge that "feels the world intensely" and "wants to say something" – a sensation represented in the paintings through (relatively) expansive fields of forceful color. She often places her figures at or towards an edge of the picture plane – simultaneously a border and private space, places of exit and hiding, exposure and alienation. Within this space that signifies the periphery of personal and interpersonal decisions, a keen vulnerability is exposed. The paintings become about the tension between the possible effects and fears of fulfilled desire and the suppression of that desire.

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