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Abstraction Gets a Life

Three group exhibitions currently on view in New York are doing abstraction (read: abstract painting) a great service with their presentations of works that squarely redirect our attention away from rehashed formalism (found in much of the "safe" abstract painting we are being inundated with these days — painting that has never lacked a superficial audience and a steady market) and toward the body as a site for visual and psychological source material that maintains its relevance to us and our status as conflicted, *living* things (who was it who said that it was meaningless to talk about a "death of painting" because it never was alive to begin with?). These exhibitions all include solid works that actively manipulate abstraction and its imagery to re-address issues that bring the whole enterprise back to life, jerking the claims of abstract painting back into line and keeping them from spiraling off into the kind of detached pseudoelitism that quickly becomes boring.

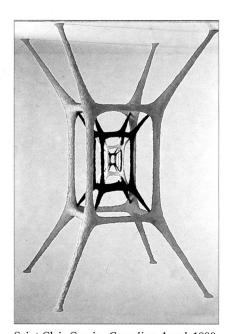
In "Masquerade (Body Double)" at Postmasters, works by Jeanne Dunning, Lari Pittman, Lucas Samaras and Matthew Weinstein are each in their own way infused with the presence of the human body. In Samaras' manipulated Polaroids of himself the translation is direct and literal. Dunning's photographs of peeled fruits force us to read them as metaphorical eviscerations of a humanoid body because of their scale and detailing of circulatory systems. Pittman's For now inside, later to be released upon maturation (1988) offers two large eyes that stare out at us, effectively animating the physicality of the canvas — this painting is a trapped body. Weinstein's paintings (which, by the way, keep getting better) are the most "abstract" in the show but, once again, they utilize traceable clues (silhouettes of body builders, Mickey Mouse ears, car-body colors) to show us in no uncertain terms that these works are most interested in participating in our lives in the same way that other bodies do.

"Play between Fear and Desire" at Germans van Eck combines paintings and sculptures by Eric Bainbridge, Saint Clair Cemin, Glenn Goldberg, Jill Levine, Fiona Rae, Elena Sisto and Daniel Wiener into a colorful romp through abstraction that literally reaches out and grabs our bodies in order to provoke our participation. Standouts here are Levine and Wiener, whose sculptures (which are quite unlike anything else out there, even each other) disrupt the conventions of abstract painting by taking highly suggestive forms that often seem to resist their paint jobs or positions as art objects. The abstract painters in the group — Goldberg and Rae — are more interested in heaping on the references

(to popular culture, to other cultures, etc.), the better to make us feel more comfortable with their respective reuses of the language.

"The Whole Part" at fiction/nonfiction, which includes photographs by John Coplans, sculptures by Rona Pondick, and paintings by John Wesley, remains, unlike the other shows, more in the representational mode. However, the abstracting that is going on here is quite unsettling, as body parts in all three cases are lopped off, snapped one on top of another, and left hanging. Pondick's sculpture, called Swinger, made of wax balls with chattering teeth and a man's shoe, and dangling from a wire, is the best thing here. In these shows, abstraction truly does get a life and it's a pretty strong one, powerful enough to drain the energy from a lot of the relatively thin stuff going on around it.





Saint Clair Cemin, *Guardian Angel*, 1990, hydrocal on wood, 71x71 in.