

ARTSCENE™

The Monthly Digest to Art in Southern California



BILL BARMINSKI
details of works from "ABOUT FACE"

**WALLACE BERMAN • WILLIAM PAJAUD •
JAMES NACHTWEY • CONSTANCE E. SCOPELITIS •
"VILLA AMERICA" • AND MUCH MORE**

so many of the images that span his 30-year career. Nachtwey's mastery of composition, lighting, color, and texture is fully in evidence. His photographs are unfailingly dramatic, indeed, theatrical. An image of heroin addicts entombed in a dark "rehabilitation" center makes full use of the spotlight effect of slanting light coming into a vast dark room through barred windows to create a Dante-esque (which is to say, Moreau-esque) vision of hell. An image from Darfur of a woman with a sick or dead relative (we don't know which because Nachtwey only titles his photographs with country and date--this one is dubbed "Sudan, 2004") makes more than passing allusion to the Pieta.

Shi'a women encased in head-to-foot black chadors ("Iraq, 2003") are welded together to suggest a mountain range, with only a bare outstretched hand isolated against the black to suggest that the mass is animate. Nachtwey's eye for the "iconic" is as single-minded and dogged as the homing head of a heat-seeking missile. The problem, as this particular photo illustrates, is that in so mightily striving to communicate something grandly symbolic about the Human Condition, Nachtwey's photographs frequently descend to the level of style-obsessed fashion photography. The intent behind this photo and the related one showing a phalanx of marching Shi'a men in blood-stained white garments shouting and brandishing swords during (I presume) the festival of Ashura, may well be entirely benign, but these images are text-book examples of a Westerner latching onto a spectacle that validates his own fantasies of exotic Otherness. The "witness" here is revealed to be a fabulist.

Nachtwey does better when he attends to specifics without trying too hard to fit them into some preconceived art-historical template. In an image from Vietnam, the right third is occupied a boy napping with his head on a woman's lap as they both sit on a bed. The left two-thirds of the picture is filled with what seems like a pile of fine gravel or sawdust that has seeped into the room from outside, and on which are stuck two chairs bearing an old television set and an electronic box. It is a picture in

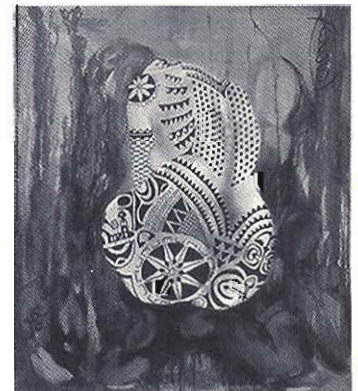
which the photographer seems to have some inkling of his own intrusiveness, and it stands out because the arrangement it frames is simultaneously strange and, relatively, matter-of-fact.

In the end, it's worth keeping in mind that photojournalism does not exist to change the world but to sell newspapers and magazines by satisfying an insatiable demand for sensation and spectacle. What it delivers in the way of peripheral glimpses of other people's suffering is it does so at the price of wrenching them from a context that resists being reduced to a simple image, and which is therefore rendered invisible. It is within these limitations that Nachtwey has chosen to operate. His achievement is that, perhaps more than any other photographer of recent times, he has made hell photogenic.

Mario Cutajar

CONSTANCE E. SCOPELITIS

(Marion Meyer Contemporary Art, Orange County) Contemporary art found in Southern California galleries and museums has never been more fascinating, in good part because of today's wide range of styles and mediums. Gone are all traces of dogma when one school dominated--anything goes. Galleries, in turn, are freer to explore different directions, and viewers have a chance to widen their horizons correspondingly. In a gallery that has established a reputation for featuring mostly abstract painting with a few rep-



Constance E. Scopelitis, "South Pacific Mermaid," after Klimt," oil on linen, 34 x 40".

representational landscapes interspersed, Constance Edwards Scopelitis deftly combines figurative painting with abstract backgrounds, or abstract narration rendered in a figurative style.

The result is a form of magical realism, an intriguing combination of disjointed bodies and limbs, surrounded by neo-classical elements and symbols representing ancient mythology or supporting personal storytelling. "The Gods" and her "Mermaid" series are representative examples of this particular direction.

Scopelitis is also an intellectually astute painter, someone who has not only mastered technique but challenges viewers to wholly immerse themselves in the works. It also is evident that she draws very well. Even some of the more accomplished contemporary portraitists or figurative painters wind up falling short in that department--proportions are skewed, features or appendages too sketchy, backgrounds either too sparse or too overwhelming--leaving one feeling shortchanged. However, Scopelitis' paintings deliver.

Whether you're up to deciphering the array of symbols accompanying much of the central figuration is another matter. At times, the surrounding plot gets a bit thick, threatening to obscure the subject; or the colors are a bit too upbeat, bright or pastel, becoming saccharine. This is the fate of "Red Eden" and "Blue Madonna," though the latter is saved by Scopelitis' deft handling of the overlap between subject and background.

After a time, one might long for something darker, maybe nihilistically noir. But then, "Woman," an erotic, multi-layered, richly textured composition in shades of red, and "Standing Tall," a straight-on depiction of the female form embellished by symbols and tattoos reminiscent of exotic Asian dances, offer relief from the otherwise unflagging brightness.

"Family," on the other hand, suggests rather than depicts the figure. The combination of a subtle palette and predominance of abstract form and implied movement establishes this painting as the show's lead, followed by the lyrical, dreamlike "Mermaid Series-Beaks."

It's noteworthy that the majority of female bodies lack heads and faces. Scopelitis also earns her bread as a portraitist, and that may have a bearing here on her more personal work. The current series of paintings is a distinct and apparently intellectually necessary departure from her commercial work, with "Mrs.(1) Solinger," a classic portrait of a stern faced woman posed against a richly textured, tapestry-style background, being the notable exception. The one portrait displays a photographer's mastery of light and brings to mind the simple drama of James McNeill Whistler's compositions.

Over all, Scopelitis' body of work suggests that this mid-career transplant from Indiana is establishing a niche between her commercial work and personal expression, between art that is accessible and yet still presents a challenge.

Daniella Walsh

WILLIAM PAJAUD

(M. Hanks Gallery, Santa Monica)
 "Both my ethnic and cultural backgrounds serve as root sources of my work," artist William Pajaud has written. Pajaud, who recently turned 80, is one of the preeminent living African American artists. An exhibition of his recent work showcases his skills with oil pastel, pencil drawing and watercolor. The works are intimate in scale and emotion, and consist of figure studies and portraits. A mood of quiet reflection, dignity and warmth informs this richly personal art.

In 2003 the gallery exhibited paintings and drawings of Pajaud with a selection of works dedicated to honoring black women and remembering the artist's good friend, John Biggers. Long in the front rank of African American artists, Biggers passed away in 2001 and he is remembered in the current exhibit with a sensitively executed pencil drawing titled simply "John."

Pajaud's mother was a religious woman fond of wearing hats to church. She apparently had a huge collection