

Blurred Boundaries and Other Connections

A mix of blue-chip names and energetic younger artists on the Lower East Side is further evidence of the increasingly blurred boundaries among Manhattan's art districts.



by Thomas Micchelli
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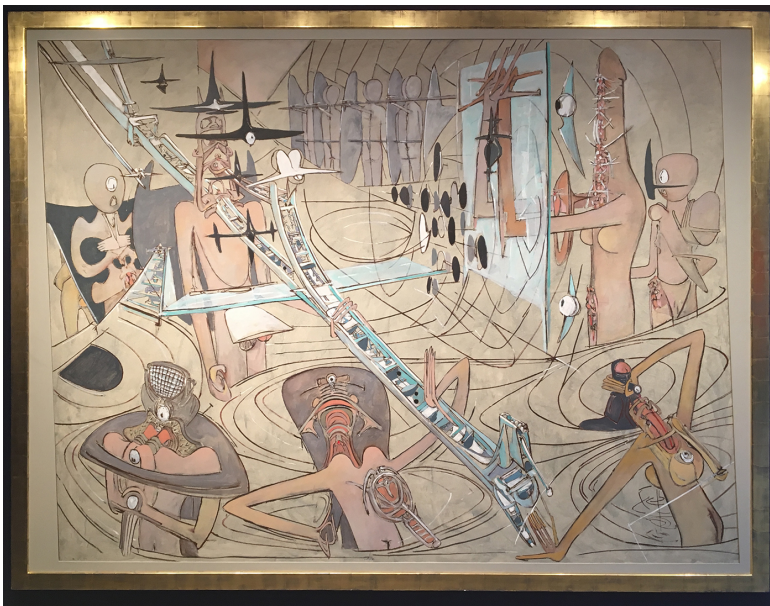
Ed Ruscha, "Sanitary Science" (1990), acrylic and oil on canvas, 36 x 42 inches (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

For the moment, I would like to sidestep the theme of *Cosmic Connections*, a group exhibition featuring nearly 50 works at TOTAH on the Lower East Side. While there is a degree of commonality among the sculptures, paintings, drawings, prints, and photographs on display, the show's real attraction is its concentration of canonical and current blue-chip names mixed among an energetic group of younger artists. The result is fractious in spots, but the best work, presented without the trappings of traditional hierarchies, holds its own regardless of its origin on the generational continuum.

With its ground floor gallery painted midnight blue (the basement level is conventionally white), and the label information handwritten directly on the walls, the exhibition design perhaps calls too much attention to itself. However, while I never quite shook the blue walls' cave-like oppressiveness or the apparent literalism with which they underscored the cosmic theme, many of the artworks seemed to glow against them, especially the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico and Agnes Martin.

The appearance of those two names, along with Bruce Conner, Joan Miró, Roberto Matta, Julio González, Joseph Cornell, Ed Ruscha, and Edward Hopper, among others, is further evidence of the increasingly blurred boundaries among Manhattan's art districts, with the limited space available to most Lower East Side galleries proving no obstacle to the kinds of historical surveys and old-new mashups more commonly mounted in Chelsea or on the Upper East Side.

Of course, none of this would matter if the works in question weren't top-flight, and in *Cosmic Connections* many of them are, including several extravagantly sized pieces and some modestly scaled gems.



Roberto Matta, *La rencontre du vitreur avec le forçat de la lumière (en hallucination première)* (1946), oil on canvas, 76 x 98 inches

Roberto Matta's eight-foot-wide "*La rencontre du vitreur avec le forçat de la lumière (en hallucination première)*" (1946), which greets you at the door, is one of the Chilean Surrealist's trademark vertiginous compositions, with a destabilizing diagonal shooting downward from the upper left to the lower right.

This indecipherable element, which suggests a mechanized belt from an assembly line, is surrounded by distorted humanoid figures, including one with female breasts and a phallic head, all struggling with *Alien*-style parasites boring into their bodies. Painted in faded tints of rose and gray against a sand-colored field, the figures are further agitated by black lines flowing through and eddying around the negative space between them.

Matta and Neo-Popists like Kenny Scharf, who is also in the show, are direct antecedents to the scrappy, catch-all Surrealism that dominates much contemporary painting. However, the exhibition is not about what's-old-is-new-again, but a cross-generational sensibility described in the gallery's press release as "the essential grace that connects one with the universe in a strange, intense light."

Admittedly, that is not a lot to go on in terms of specifics, but between digressions (including the birth of the universe in Greek mythology and the etymology of the word "muse" as "explore with desire"), the statement does provide one concrete

clue: that each work contains “an *Axis Mundi*,” which various cultural traditions interpret as the spiritual link between heaven and earth, but is here defined as “a funnel, a tunnel, a ladder or tree, a line traced [...] between actuality, fantasy, and future.”

The *Axis Mundi* could very well be the diagonal running across the Matta, but in other works the funnel/tunnel is less obvious and often elusive, adding a layer of mystery to the qualities connecting one piece to another.

Perhaps it's the column of air created by the armchairs facing each other beneath a sunny blue sky in de Chirico's Metaphysical-redux, “*Mobili nella valle*” from 1963, one of his late reiterations of the groundbreaking proto-Surrealist paintings he produced a half-century earlier. While some question the aesthetic soundness of these stylistically retrofitted works, they remain infinitely preferable to the artist's rubbery, Fascist-era gladiatorial imagery. And in a contemporary context, with their shiny-bright replication of an earlier idiom (and the color in this canvas is startlingly clear), they offer a fascinating slant on the debate around originality and commodification.



Wallace Berman, "Untitled (Motor)" (1975), 25-image verifax collage, 33 1/2 x 30 1/2 inches

But where would you find an *Axis Mundi* in the marvelously enigmatic "Untitled (Motor)" (1975) by the San Francisco Beat icon Wallace Berman? Twenty-five verifax images (precursors of plain-paper photocopies), assembled into a grid, are presented as reversed negatives, with each featuring a hand holding an AM-FM transistor radio. A different photo is superimposed over the radio's casing in each cell of the grid, which, to 21st-century eyes, turns the radio into an uncanny impersonation of a smartphone. The images-within-images include an ear, a cross, the pope, a mushroom, a woman's legs, a handgun, and other equally disconnected, or barely connected, elements. Yet the lit-from-within impression inherent to photographic negatives endows the collage with a quasi-mystical aura that seems to simmer just below the surface.

Within the exhibition's premise, it might be reasonable to view the entire work as a kind of portal between actuality and fantasy, which is an argument that can easily be made for Joseph Cornell's "Soap Bubble Box" (1948), a construction in dark wood that nearly blends into the dark wall, throwing its encased objects — a set of stemware; a vintage bubble pipe; an antique astronomical chart — into high relief. Glinting like an apparition in the night sky, the sculpture comes across with a blunt, almost raw beauty that, despite its antiquarian elements, avoids the lost-time nostalgia found in much of Cornell's work.



Gilles Bensimon, "1793" (2015), Japanese ink on paper, 21 x 22 inches

Overall, the show presents not as much a unified vision than a suggestion of spiritualism behind a heterogeneous selection of work. Some pieces, such as Ed Ruscha's "Sanitary Science" (1990), with its all-caps title hovering in raw-looking red paint over a black field studded with soft-focus light patterns, or David Austen's "Stars" (1999), featuring dozens of eight-pointed stars scattered across a rich, red ground, overtly align with the theme, while others seem to wander off to find other means of expressing "the essential grace that connects one with the universe."

One of the standouts among the more oblique works is "Dusk in Coober Pedy" (1978), Wim Wenders' black-and-white photograph of a feral dog standing on the roof of a spattered, battered, apparently abandoned car in a desolate landscape. We see them from the rear, with both the dog and car pointed toward the low-ridged horizon. The alien bleakness comes with the territory: in Coober Pedy, a town in South Australia known for its opal mines, the daytime heat is so intense that its residents live below ground in housing known as "dugouts."



Wim Wenders, "Dusk in Coober Pedy" (1978), silver gelatin print on baryt paper framed behind glass on alu dibond, 15 11/32 x 24 inches

The year the photo was taken, 1978, marked the ascendance of the German New Wave's international influence as well as the near-midpoint of Wenders' most vital period, from the *Road Movie Trilogy* (1974-76) to *Paris, Texas* (1984), and the photo shares those films' picaresque vision (it reminded me immediately of his rambling 1976 masterwork, *Kings of the Road*, the third entry in the trilogy). At once reflective and apocalyptic, the visual impact of "Dusk in Coober Pedy" punches a window through the wall's darkness, opening onto a time when it seemed only natural that doomsday was right around the corner.

The exhibition includes a number of strongly imagined representational works by historically notable artists, including Victor Brauner's outsider-ish drawing from 1948; Bruce Conner's oval sci-fi collage made from antique landscape prints, and an assemblage of oddball artifacts by Ray Johnson.

There is also "Evening Wind" (1922), an etching by Edward Hopper, the American realist mainstay and one of the true outliers in the show. The work's content and approach — a straightforward rendering of a nude woman distracted by a pair of fluttering curtains as she climbs into bed — mesh with little else in the show, and yet somehow it looks very comfortable on the salon-style wall, tucked between the Bruce Conner above and the Wim Wenders below. The connection feels less cosmic, however, and more material, with the etching's black lines linking up with the old-



Kara Rooney, "Alter No. 8" (2016),
hydrocal, resin, wood, digital photograph,
rebar, 55 x 15 x 10 inches

fashioned crosshatching in Conner's cut-up prints, and its deep shadows blending with the darkness encroaching on the car in Wenders' photo.

And in terms of materials, the most effective pieces dating from the past several years tend to be those whose aesthetic capital is steeply invested in what they're made of. Dan Walsh's "Blink" (2013), a geometric abstraction in flat, matte acrylic on canvas, is a study in the haunting slipperiness of closely paired values; the longer you look at its patterns of dark blue against a black field, the farther they seem to slip from your

grasp. By contrast, the aggressively textured assemblage by Gilles Bensimon, "1793" (2015), features what looks like hundreds of pieces of white Japanese paper cut into rings and scribbled over in black ink, one of the few works to evoke the cosmos's complexity and chaos.

Kara Rooney's "Alter No. 8" (2016) cuts its own path between the streamlined and the rough-hewn, with two columns of ravaged white hydrocal rising above a sleek, black-framed, abstract digital photograph jammed into their base. The intuitive logic resonating from the sculpture's components convinces you of the rightness of their fusion despite the blatant incongruence of their forms and textures, an ineffable sense of the whole in defiance of the parts.



Agnes Martin, "Untitled" (2003), acrylic and graphite on canvas, 12 x 12 inches

And then there's Agnes Martin, whose retrospective at the Guggenheim recently opened to rapturous reviews. Her "Untitled" (2003), completed the year before she died, is a remarkably intimate 12-by-12-inch painting of pale blue and yellow horizontal bands in acrylic and graphite, a color scheme very similar to her untitled 1993-94 series on permanent display at the Harwood Museum of Art in Taos, New Mexico.

This tiny, radiant work, hanging in spot-lit splendor against the dark blue wall, exerts a gravitational pull on the 18 pieces surrounding it, including the Brauner, Wenders, Hopper, Conner, and Bensimon. If those artworks, so radically different from each other, are related by "the essential grace that connects one with the universe in a strange, intense light," no outside referent is necessary for the strange, intense light emanating from Martin's painting; its grace suffices as a universe in itself.

Cosmic Connections *continues at TOTAH (183 Stanton Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 18.*