



INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

Art in America

EUROPE

VENICE BIENNALE
PREVIEW

ZERO

TWO GERMANY'S

WIM DELVOYE

DAVID CLAERBOUT

plus

SHIRIN NESHAT

JUNE/JULY '09 \$9.00

View of Lee Waisler's exhibition "Portraits," 2009; at Sundaram Tagore.



MIRA SCHOR

MOMENTA ART

Mira Schor's small, unframed paintings—oil on linen and ink on gessoed tracing paper—suggest the vulnerability of barely formed thoughts arising unbidden between waking and sleep. Hovering throughout her recent work are word- and thought-balloons that seem to have been conceived less with a view toward public statement than as products of an intensely private studio practice. The isolated words that appear in Schor's cursive script—"suddenly," "me," "anonymity," the last painted self-effacingly in barely visible, shiny black letters on a matte black ground—feel incipient, like shards of meaning pushing through pain. An intimist whose candor is akin to Emily Dickinson's, Schor uses the sparest of means to signal, as the poet put it, "The loneliness / One dare not sound." Words fail, and yet, seen as painting, they convey a great deal.

Balloons, those common graphic vessels, play several roles in this work, including containers of thought or speech, heads, clouds, mirrors and actual balloons. In two paintings, *Cool Guy* and *The Professor* (both 2008), they become comical caricatures wearing glasses. Their animated contours, executed—as is Schor's painted handwriting—with single strokes, sometimes indicate electrical circuits. They also recall the humorous and variously signifying condoms of Schor's earlier work. Sometimes containing a thicker texture where a thought has been overpainted—that is, silenced—the balloons are subtly nuanced (a quality lost in

reproduction). Even wrinkles in the supporting surfaces convey feeling.

In the exhibition's rebuslike installation, the paintings all assume roles in a quasi-narrative structure. One canvas features the word "suddenly," which interrupts a tan ground; the empty balloon in a cool white painting that follows is ruptured by a bright vertical slash. The theme of intrusion repeats, each time as though without warning, throughout this sequence of works, which ends with ascending balloons, the last bearing the hopeful inscription, "a life." Two paintings titled *As a Cloud* (both 2008), each showing a solitary balloon, evoke Wordsworth's lonely, cloudlike wandering, though with no promise of that poem's "crowd, a host, of golden daffodils." The emotional perplexity of Schor's work is both personal and general.

Through her writings and co-editorship (with the painter Susan Bee) of the feminist publication *M/E/A/N//I//N/G*, Schor has contributed greatly to the ever-vexed discourses on the relation of gender to painting and of the autobiographical to the political, and to other issues at the nexus of theory and practice. (Due out within the year is a book she edited of the writings of Jack Tworok, and a collection of her own recent essays.) With this new body of work, it is as though Schor has relinquished her precisely articulated overview. Not that she has rejected it, but rather, consistent with her belief in painting per se, she has let the conceptual concerns of her long pursued project take care of themselves.

—Robert Berling

LEE WAISLER

SUNDARAM TAGORE

Very large close-ups of faces greeted viewers entering Lee Waisler's recent show. All are icons of 20th-century culture, and most are immediately recognizable—Marilyn Monroe, Albert Einstein, Gandhi—while a few are less familiar. Of the 20 or so portraits shown, all based loosely on photographs, most were 5 to 6 feet tall, though there were some, like the study of Samuel Beckett, that were 20 inches square. There were a few three-quarter views and one or two profiles, but generally the subject met the viewer's gaze eye to eye.

Defined with strong contours and starkly contrasted colors, the heads are set against flat, colored backgrounds. Closer inspection reveals Waisler's distinctive method. Throughout, he has followed the drawn outlines of salient features—eyes, nose, mouth, mustache—with strips of maple (they are 1/8-inch thick and 3/8-inch wide), gluing their thin edges to the canvas. The strips create small walls between different areas of the face, and cast slight shadows. Flesh tones are painted fairly loosely in these sharply delineated areas. The hair is treated differently; Waisler mixes a heavy impasto for beards, eyebrows and scalp hair, which he brushes and scores to give direction to the flow of growth. The artist used a similar impasto technique in his earlier abstract, Tantric-influenced art.

Waisler, who is based in Los Angeles, has been showing since the 1960s, when his work was tied to the social and political struggles of the time: the Vietnam

Serban Savu: *The Guardian of the Valley*, 2008, oil on canvas, 12% by 19% inches; at David Nolan.



War, the Civil Rights Movement. Here, he presents personal heroes who, he says in a press release, have “cast luminous shadows much like starkly placed lights on a deeply darkened road.” In addition to those mentioned, the series includes a brooding Kafka, a delicate Virginia Woolf, a sunny Dalai Lama and a natty Sigmund Freud, as well as Aung San Suu Kyi (the democracy advocate long under house arrest in the former Burma), Muhammad Yunus (the micro-credit guru) and Wangari Muta Maathai (the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize)—an impressive roster of artistic, intellectual and humanist pioneers.

Waisler presents them in a fairly straightforward manner, allowing viewers to bring their own biases and sympathies to the subject. And they certainly reflect his own. It is often said that a portrait is as much a picture of the artist as of the sitter, and through his selection Waisler implies that their collective outlook on life is indeed his own philosophic self-portrait.

—Michael Harvey

SERBAN SAVU

DAVID NOLAN

Within Eastern Europe, Romania was one of the last Communist strongholds. On December 22, 1989, its dictatorial leader, Nicolae Ceausescu, fled protesting citizens at the Central Committee building by helicopter, only to be captured and executed alongside his wife three days later. Serban Savu, the young Romanian painter who had his first New York solo exhibition at David Nolan’s Chelsea location, was

11 years old at the time, yet his paintings project a mature and quietly unnerving vision of Communism’s vestigial influence on contemporary Romanians.

Savu populates many of the 14 oil-on-linen landscapes in the exhibition (all works 2008) with an analogous arrangement: swatches of verdant grass and trees interrupted by the serious and formidable cement fixtures of Communist-era architecture. Curtains of gray sky cool and darken the scenes. And often in the middle ground, figures seem hemmed in by their surroundings. In *The Edge of the Empire*, which shares its title with the exhibition, a group of men and women stand beside a road, their faces obscured by brushwork to suggest the anonymity of the ideal Communist citizen. However, their body language—hands in pockets, disengaged, forbearing—communicates their entrapment by the hulking gray buildings that haunt the background. The small size of the figures in relation to the canvas communicates their marginalization and impotence within the gears of a larger sociopolitical machine.

The paintings broadcast an allegiance to Social Realism; the influence of Ben Shahn, Raphael and Moses Soyer, and Edward Hopper is evident. (Hopper’s talent with slanting light is particularly relevant.) Savu’s subjects are the everymen and -women of Romania. Some of the men are at work, shirtless, mixing concrete or foraging through heaps of scrap metal. Some figures wait expectantly; for what, the viewer is not informed. Some are at leisure, and they are in the minority here as they

bask under blue skies. But even the sunbathing subjects who occupy *In The Shadow of the Dam* are not free from a looming, pallid wall of concrete that casts a long, angular shadow.

Savu’s strength is that he opens a window onto the lives of present-day Romanians, who remain oppressed by history’s lingering narrative, if not by a Ceausescu-style tyrant. Their identities, Savu suggests, are rooted in a head-down, steadfast desire to survive, to make the best of an existence perpetually at the brink.

—Nick Obour

WILLIAM SCHARF

MEREDITH WARD

Despite the consistent strength of his work, William Scharf has been flying under the art-world radar for most of his long and extraordinary career. The veteran Pennsylvania-born artist, now 82, was a young upstart on New York’s Abstract-Expressionist scene in the 1950s. Between infrequent stints in show business throughout the ’50s, ranging from performing as a clown diver in an aquacade to dramatic acting on Broadway, Scharf repeatedly returned to painting. He befriended Stuart Davis, Franz Kline and especially Mark Rothko, whose influence may still be felt in Scharf’s works, with their wispy pools of brilliant color. This graceful exhibition of recent paintings, “Blue Is,” found the painter riffing on azure tones in several large compositions (up to 5 by 6 feet) and an array of smaller works on paper.

A number of pieces, especially *The Eclipse Finds the Golden Ladder*, recall