

REVIEWS

CHICAGO

Avis Newman

Renaissance Society of the University of Chicago
5811 S. Ellis Ave., 312/702-8670

It's paradoxical to find this eight-piece exhibition deep in the heart of the University of Chicago. One might even say that English artist Avis Newman's association-layered, impossible-to-be-pigeonholed work is like a cancer threatening to spill out of the Renaissance Society's white cell, leaving higher education's departmental distinctions defenseless and meaningless. This art's economy is all business, literally.

Two charcoal-on-paper drawings—*Figure Association #1* and *#2*—serve as unsuspecting guides for the six mixed-media-on-canvas creations which are the focal point of the show. The pair steadfastly portray the outlines of figures in unwell: one upside-down, tumbling, and the other squatting, a left hand grafted to its skull, while a second—sprawled—shoots out tendril fingers.

Twin suggestions of turmoil.

There were also Newman's large—some 9' x 14"—unstretched canvases stapled to the walls. On first look, they appear to be amorphous puddles of gray and brown, circumscribed by black borders with minds of their own. Elsewhere, red oil smears, loosely rolled chamois cloth strips, and black pen scribbles randomly crisscross one another.

But then the associations come forth. The black lines become buttocks, tomes, and arms in a kind of "Find the Figure" fugue of curiosity, started unwittingly by those two charcoal drawings. Earth-tone color fields suggest the cave paintings of Lascaux, a testimonial to collective memory; forever Jung. Maps begin to appear, even of color bridged or dammed by pigment-impregnated material. Battle plans—reminiscent of military history books—trace the ebb and flow of troop movements, earthworks thrown up, salients held and overrun. The mind turns to the heavens, and a template of constellations come into focus. What's more, upon further inspection, the seemingly inconsequential ink marks metamorphose into tiny beasts—moose, frog, crab—and lizard-like, cannibalisms that both Dr. Moreau and Hieronymus Bosch could be proud of.

Newman's work is a kaleidoscope of subliminal imagery—a sort of multiple-image postcard that reveals different secrets from different angles; an hour on the couch, free-associating to beat the band. These works successfully pay tribute to the host of systems people use to impose order on the chaotic inner and outer worlds they inhabit, and the transitory nature of each and every one of those systems.

Richard Gage

Judith Geichman

Spartan Museum of Judaica
618 S. Michigan Ave., 312/922-9012

It's not often that an exhibition reveals a major breakthrough in an artist's work, yet that's just what this series of paintings by Judith Geichman clearly shows. Conventional wisdom, and the dictates of commercial galleries, has it that older works and an artist's anomalies can often be confusing to viewers (and potential collectors). Curator Hannah Dreiner and Geichman go back instead to illuminate the artist's rather amazing growth over the last four years by presenting earlier and experimental works alongside new pieces to stunning effect.

The earliest painting, *Meeting within the Toveress* (1984), is a solid example of Geichman's work from that year. Depicting a temple-like structure with paired columns containing a swirling,

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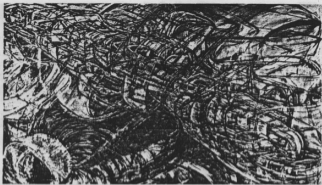
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JUDD GEISMAN, "Thrust of Retraction," 12" x 7", 1987-88. Photo courtesy of Spertus Museum of Judaica.

pattern-oriented abstraction, the paint was applied in tight, short strokes utilizing a complex palette of high-key colors. The work's composition and process evoke references to Celia Kuznetsov's manuscripts of the sixth century. It is a successfully meditative work, and stands quite well as a record of unerring diligence on the artist's part. Geisman is quoted in the accompanying gallery literature as saying that she wanted to "build a Temple with paint," and this is both the painting's triumph and failure. While the piece conveys a surface solidarity contributing to an overall archaic quality, the work is also static in feel, its energy frozen and crystallized. Geisman's concept of the ineffable is recorded, but in a fossilized state.

Geisman's work during the next year, as presented in *Busy Hand Land Busy Hand II*, clearly reflects her growing frustration with her own process. While much remains the same, the application has begun to change. The marks of these works are wider and more gestural, the pattern more open to the variations of application. The next three pieces, *Flapping of Great Wings I*, *Flapping of Great Wings II*, and *Angel of Light and Dark*, all works on paper from 1987, begin to actualize this major shift in Geisman's focus. The clear structure of the temple has been replaced by a structure of a non-specific nature, and the palette, so complex in the earlier work, moves toward simplification. The brush work, so tight and flat previously, is looser, open, and reflects the process more than the result. While this change creates problems in *Flapping of Great Wings I*—with the color dissolving into mud in many areas—it eventually craps into the anomalous but breakthrough work titled *Angelic Dance*.

With a stripped-down palette comprised only of orange, black, and white, *Angelic Dance* achieves a pared-down structure altogether and completely gives itself over to process—referring not to ninth-century art but to DeKooning's of the 50s.

A true synthesis of her earlier structures and the later general works, *Thrust of Movement* (1988)—with its washes, smears, gestural marks, and translucent structure—is an interactive piece that allows the viewer to participate fully in the unraveling of the mystery contained. It is a rich, powerful work that is satisfying for its open-ended yet complete resolution. More importantly, it heralds a dramatic new maturity on the part of Geisman and unequivocally moves her toward the

forefront of Chicago abstractionists.

Deven Golden

The Aura of Neo-Impressionism

David and Alfred Smart Gallery
University of Chicago, 5550 S. Greenwood Ave.,
312/762-8200

Appropriate to this gallery and its university situation, this exhibition was also a visual celebration, a month of Sundays spent quietly with friends. Fifty-two works from the W.J. Holliday collection comprised the show—a rare opportunity, since only a small sample is regularly available at the collection's home base, the Indianapolis Museum of Art. To find the equivalent elsewhere is unlikely.

Georges Seurat, as presumably everyone knows, was the innovator, but he died young—a mere 31. It was his apostle Paul Signac who survived as painter, writer, and theorist. Signac lived until 1935, at which time Neo-Impressionism had been self-propelled for some time. The latest death date in the catalogue is 1975. (No doubt there are those today who, once they fill in the blank beyond the dash, will qualify for an updated list.)

Thereby lies a moral instruction. We tend to think of art history as art history teaches—that is, as a succession of styles (either as inevitably ordered or randomly expressed, according to our philosophy). The invisible is, we tend to ignore the overlaps. Or, worse, the overlaps are hidden away and not even available to be ignored or dispensed or loved.

Also, too many people in a given movement tend to be hoos and conscious masters. Thus, this observer once heard a prominent artist in a lecture lament the number of rooms at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam devoted to Dutch Little Masters that didn't make the Top 40. He was capable of dismissing one of civilization's richest painting centuries because he had suffered a dull afternoon. So, this person and others might, upon seeing the Holliday Collection, despair and run back to the Art Institute of Chicago to bask once more in the aura of *Le Grand Jeu*.

Seurat had a taste for the heroic, it is true—something that didn't carry over to Signac and the others. All those shows are modest in scale and modest in intent; these are minor masters, certainly, but this doesn't distract from their lustre.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect the collection reveals is the variety of approaches Neo-

Impressionism afforded. Maximilien Luce (one of the stalwarts) is represented by one example close to standard Impressionism (*La Rue Montfaucon*) and another closer to realism (*La Rue Hugo*). To Jeanne Selmerlain-Dezgrange, the pointillist dots become like mosaic tesserae, bold and decorative, as in *Garden at La Hune, Saint-Tropez*.

Likewise, it is interesting to see the striking example furnished by Jean Metzinger (*The Swabian, ca 1905*) done before he subsided into his mid-twentieth-century cubism, and the same for Auguste Herbin's charming *Park in Paris* (1904), done so well before he committed his life to abstract blunders. Christian Beldin, on the other hand, was no doubt more at home in his later lush expressionism than in his 1902 or 1903 Landscapes.

Sorting out the styles, it is often difficult to separate Neo-Impressionism from its predecessors and offshoots. Another direction these artists leaned was toward the Nazis and other ideologues, as with George Moore's *Sunday Afternoon*, or the very special watercolor of Marvina (Maria Serebika Rossanovitch) which are pale and precious but also one of the few surprises in a very solid selection such as this.

The collection catalogue (Indiana University Press, 1983) relates that Holliday originally intended to collect Impressionists—before he realized this would take the resources of an oil-rich estate at the very least. Luckily, he was led to this highly estimable project instead.

Earl Meehl

Non Goldin

Catherine Edelman Gallery
300 W. Superior St., 312/264-2350

Nan Goldin's "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency" is a diary of sorts, but an edited, sanitized, romanticized one. The 20 photographs shown here are the artist's favorites from a slide presentation of hundreds of images presented in conjunction with this exhibit in this new space, Chicago's only commercial gallery devoted to contemporary photography. The images are all informal, almost snapshots, of the artist's friends and lovers—her "extended family"—in their rude digs and cheap hotels in Berlin, London, and New York's Lower East Side. She tries to shock us. In the slide show we see her friends shooting up, masturbating, on the toilet, and being beaten from beatings, but it is all