

Art in Review

■ Downtown dealers go to the office ■ Playing with medical images ■ Contradictions, large and small ■ Cheerful colors in festive reveries.

The Art Exchange

60 Broad Street
Financial district
Through June 15

This "alternative alternative art fair," organized for the Alliance for Downtown New York, unfolds through five desolate floors in a vacant office building near the New York Stock Exchange. It is, literally and figuratively, about as downtown as you can get. Its participants are 40 young art dealers, some of whom preside over smallest, out-of-the-way galleries in New York City or Europe, and others who just deal privately. They've thrown up their wares in spacious corner offices and hallways distinguished by battered walls, corporate-yellow carpets, much too much wood paneling and eye-boggling views of lower Manhattan. The overall effect is both post-apocalyptic and uplifting, like "Blade Runner" infused with something that smells like the art-world equivalent of Teen Spirit.

The centerpiece is a sprawling exhibition of the new and not-so-new organized by Bill Arning, the former director of White Columns, and titled "The Most Important Thing in the World: Oasis vs. Blur and Artists Who Rock," which overlaps between contemporary art and pop music. But the individual gallery exhibitions are, for the most part, more engaging, if only because they often include several works by the artists represented. Standout group efforts include the displays of Brownyn Keenan, Arena, black & heron and straw in Post Lee, where Jade Dellinger has organized an exhibition of five artists around the theme of nomadism. The independent curator Kenny Schachter has devoted his entire corner office to the engagingly splashy, outsiderish paintings of Brendan Cass.

At Dru Arstark, an artist from Providence, R.I., named Joe Mischlak has made a large sculpture mostly out of colored duct tape, a material that's getting a little too popular. A young private dealer from the East Village named Lucas Schoormans has filled a wall with Karl Struss's photographs of New York taken between 1909 to 1929. Pierogi 2000 of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, has mounted about 60 works on paper from its flat files, a set of which are also here. And for the grown-ups, Adam Baumgold, who runs a tiny gallery on East 72d Street, has shown up with works by Robert Rauschenberg, Saul Steinberg and James Rosenquist, among many others.

As is usual with all art fairs, regardless of how blue the chip, there is something of interest to be ferreted out at nearly every stop. Don't let some of the let's-get-wild presentations deter you: this is serious fun. ROBERTA SMITH

Daniel Spoerri

Zabriskie Gallery
41 East 57th Street
Through June 14

The 40 small works in this rare New York solo appearance by the Romanian-born Daniel Spoerri are based on pages from a 19th-century French medical textbook. The grave illustrations of invasive dental and surgical procedures serve as the ground for delicately deployed additions: shards of bone, fishhooks, teeth, glass beads and items of medical hardware.

The result is basically Surrealist work of the old school, a free-floating stream of sexual jokes and psychic titillation, alternately macabre and funny. Surrealism is always a mixed blessing. In the service of a large or personal vision, it can be an effective means to an end. As an end in itself, however, and especially when it operates at the level of the gross-out joke, it rates a quick walk-through.

Mr. Spoerri's new work lies somewhere in between. A little of its audacious prettiness goes a long way (and his images of female genitalia turned into funny faces should just be dropped from his repertoire). At the same time, its reliquary character, ornamentally embellishing images of pain and deformation, can be genuinely disturbing. In short, the work has problems, but it's good to have Mr. Spoerri's peculiar intelligence back in town. HOLLAND COTTER

Anne Truitt

Andre Emmerich Gallery
41 East 57th Street
Through June 21

Now in her mid-'0s, Anne Truitt was once associated with Color Field artists, and her geometric sculptures, constructed of wood and painted in rich monochromes, have the feel of paintings. In the seven-foot-high, squared-off column titled "Oread" (1995), included in this group of recent pieces, she brings area of pastel blue and aquamarine around the sculpture's edges to flatten the work optically and turn color into the dominant element.

The rest of the work on view here is on a much smaller scale, though it remains gently monumental. One table-top piece consists of a trio of slim uprights set on a little plinth. Painted a deep purple but capped with a band of pink, they look both like an elegant maquette for a colonnade and like a row of cigarettes standing on end.

A horizontal piece with a stepped-back base glows with an all-over cruciform yellow, a product of Ms. Truitt's repeated sandings and layerings of pigment. The sunniness is tempered, however, by the presence of two shaly vermilion lines drawn across the surface. They have the unmistakable suggestion of blood leaking from a wound.

Ms. Truitt's works have always suggested such contradictory things. They mingle Color Field, Minimalism, even Pop, with a thread of personal emotion all the more evocative for its classical restraint. All of this comes across in the small, even toy-size works in this show, which are intimate and joyous. HOLLAND COTTER

Sandro Chia

Sidney Janis Gallery
110 West 57th Street
Through June 22

Maybe it's time to cut Sandro Chia a little slack. At their best, these latest paintings — as usual, big, festive reveries involving clunky, vaguely antique figures in arcadian landscapes — have charm. The figures allude to Cézanne and Picasso but they also look comic: shy, sheepish and somehow distracted, a little like characters from Jean-Jacques



Joe Mischlak's duct-tape sculpture, at Dru Arstark's space at the Art Exchange in the financial district.

Sempé cartoons. Even St. Sebastian, whom Mr. Chia depicts shot through with arrows, seems to gaze absently toward the sky, as if pausing on an afternoon stroll. Do the works mean to be wry or serious? It's impossible to tell, but either way, the impression they make is oddly cheerful. Mr. Chia uses eye-popping reds, yellows and oranges, mixed with electric blue and turquoise, the paint thick and generously doled out; and the results are as vibrant, even joyful, as the figures, with their vacant, passive expressions, are not.

Occasionally, Mr. Chia's work is too ham-fistedly drawn, his surfaces too clotted and pasty, to look anything but ludicrous. But mostly, it's at least colorful and decorative, which is something, after all. For years, he has been made to bear more than his share of the blame for what was wrong about art in the 1980's. If the expectations and rhetoric surrounding him were once inflated, that's no reason to disregard whatever's OK about what he's doing now, is it? MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

'Matta-dors and Jugadors'

Sports Drawings by Matta From the 1950's

Mary-Anne Martin/Fine Art
23 East 73d Street
Through June 12

Fun and games are not what you think of in connection with Roberto Matta Echaurren, the Chilean abstract Surrealist known as Matta. A painter (born in 1911) who's part of the 20th-century pantheon, he's known for his explosive renditions of metaphysical space in which the human psyche and technology seem to collide. Yet in this small show, there's another Matta at work, an amused spectator making earthly encounters with football, golf, wrestling, auto racing and other forms of organized physical frenzy.

His witty drawings of manic, insectile players and their equipment, done in the 1950's, are almost schematic in their slowness, but every movement is keenly observed: the pumping of bicycle pedals, the thrust of polo mallets, the bucking

of a bronco as it tries to throw its rider. In "Auto Racing," you can almost hear the zoom of the toylike cars as they come off a curve. It's not every artist who can make such a cool transition from cosmic to comic. GRACE GLEUCK

David Deutsch

'Surveillance'

Jay Gorzsy Modern Art
190 Greene Street, near Spring Street
SoHo
Through June 22

David Deutsch continues to change his art in interesting ways. For some years, he painted man-made structures — observatories, utopian monuments, scientific contraptions — set within meticulously detailed landscapes, a "machine in the garden" theme in which Romantic nature and intrusive culture met.

More recently, he moved inside the buildings, filling their Pantheon-like domes with hundreds of framed human portraits that suggested a memorial display. He also loosened his pinpoint technique, making the faces smudgy and indistinct, to give the architectural interior a dreamlike instability.

A similarly fluid style animates his new aerial-view landscapes. They appear to depict densely wooded suburban terrain, though everything is slightly off. Trees have the ottony look of smoke; the buildings nestled among them are familiar but hard to identify. They could be motels or museums or bunkers. Their oddness is compounded by Mr. Deutsch's monochrome palette, a livid red in one painting; an antireflective blue in another.

The result is a kind of paranoid, nuclear-age version of Richard Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" series, elegant, edgy, doom-ridden. If one has a quarrel, it is simply that Mr. Deutsch has made the work — collectively titled "Surveillance" — too overly melodramatic. One misses the tension that his earlier obliqueness produced. Still, this is a strong show. HOLLAND COTTER

Ragna Berlin and Michelle Segre

Lauren Wittels Gallery
580 Broadway, near Prince Street
SoHo
Through June 26

This unusual dual exhibition introduces two artists, seemingly subordinating one's work to the other's. The Swiss artist Ragna Berlin has provided the setting: an installation consisting of an enormous brown dot painted on much of the floor and two walls. "Spot," as it is called, comes with audio accompaniment: "Mib," a repeating crunching sound, as if the dot were being rolled somewhere, like Sisyphus's ball.

Installed on the dot, and the only thing in sight not dwarfed by it, is the work of Michelle Segre, a New Yorker. Her Pop-ish installation features three enlarged slices of bread and sundry bits of crust and crumbs. Made of foam coated with wax and acrylic, the piece has a noticeable debt to Claes Oldenburg that's somewhat repaid by the way it slows down vision. It's rough, oddly mesmerizing surface, pockmarked with bits of color, suggests a carefully made painting and invites an inch-by-inch perusal, while the loose chunky crumbs become completely abstract.

Bringing one back to reality, however, is the fact that the bread seems gnawed on. The intimation of suddenly interrupted rodents all too turns Ms. Berlin's brown dot into a mouse hole. ROBERTA SMITH

'Happiness in 20th-Century Avant-Garde Art'

New York Academy of Sciences
2 East 63d Street
Through June 28

Yes, Virginia, there is happiness in 20th-century avant-garde art. To prove it, the critic Donald Kuspit, professor of art history and philosophy at the State University at Stony Brook, L.I., and Lynn Gamwell, director of the art museum at the State University at Binghamton, N.Y., have come up with a small

show of "emotionally mature" works that transcend "this century's gloomy Zeitgeist," its "prevailing dark and defensive outlook."

Flinging a wide net, they've landed objects ranging from Matisse's poignant small etching of 1929, "Woman With Hands Clapsed Before a Bowl of Fish" (Matisse, say the curators, best represents the spirit of health and happiness in art), to a small ceramic "Tea Bowl" by Warren MacKenzie, made in 1952. Among other entries, there's a delicate 1908 pencil drawing by Piet Mondrian of a chrysanthemum, a glowing portrait by the photographer Imogen Cunningham of a magnolia blossom from 1925 and a pyrotechnical lithograph, "Violette" of 1923, by Wassily Kandinsky, a heady fiesta of lines, circles, triangles and wriggles.

In short, whether or not it all fits the show's rather smug premise, there's a lot to look at, although the dark, somber front hall of the academy's neo-Italian renaissance palazzo is not the most salubrious place to view such healthy art. GRACE GLEUCK

Thomas Trosch

'Musical Comedy Medley'
Jessica Fredericks Gallery
504 West 23d Street
Chelsea
Through June 30

It's tempting to give this show the Kitch Award of the year, although, to be sure, the year has miles to go and promises to keep. Influenced, it would seem, by the beguiling art of Florine Stettheimer, that brilliant hothouse flower of the 20's and 30's (an earlier painting by Mr. Trosch was exhibited in a show paying tribute to her), the artist paints frolicsome women and sometimes men in chichi settings, accompanied by the texts of musical comedy lyrics from the 40's and 50's.

In "Musical Comedy Medley No. VII," for instance, hand-lettered sentiments by Cole Porter and E. Y. Harburg — "Around you there lies pure enchantment in disguise and endless joys you never knew" — attend a clatter of cartoonish ladies in various stages of dress, who may be at a spa or a cocktail party or both. The frilly lyrics sum up these empty lives. Mr. Trosch seems to say, as does his garish, faux-naïf painting style, deliberate in its clumsiness.

Ms. Stettheimer would find it all rather boring, I think, and so do I. GRACE GLEUCK

Also of Note

Critics' choices of some other Manhattan art shows:

"DISSIMILAR AND UNRELATED SCULPTURES," Baron/Bossard Editions, 59 West 27th Street (through June 21). This diverse survey of 15 objects in mostly nonabstract styles, by artists ranging from Joseph Beuys and Edward Kienholz to Ronie Sagaire, Jennifer Bolande, Peter Nagy and Cannon Hudson, lives up to its name without seeming incoherent. The links are modesty of scale and tenderness of touch, and often telling contrast of materials or colors (Roberta Smith).

KRISTIN OPPENHEIM, 363 Gallery, 89 Greene Street, SoHo (through June 15). This nominal installation artist continues her restless, haunting variations on Conceptual Art's empty-art-gallery-as-art theme, filling the space with the sound of her own haunting a cappella version of the opening lines of "Hey, Joe" ("Where You Goin' With That Gun In Your Hand?") and two wandering spotlight that evoke prison searchlights, or circling stingers about to dual (Smith).

JOAN WALTERNATH, Petra Bonger Gallery, 125 Lafayette Street, SoHo (through June 18). In large, elegant, mostly white drawings, the New York artist, whose sculptures varied in size, is returned to its roots in Mondrian and Neoplasticism, an implicitly regressive maneuver salvaged by beautifully worked surfaces and imposing scale (Smith).