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David Humphrey, Ilya Kabakov "David and Goliath"

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David Humphrey, Ilya Kabakov “David and Goliath”



Installation View, “David and Goliath”, summer exhibition 1988.
Jack Shainman Gallery NYC

left to right : Marc Maet, Petah Coyne, Tom Dean, Nilli Kopf,
Michel Goulet)

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“David and Goliath” at Jack Shainman — Under the title “David and Goliath” a recent group show at Jack Shainman Gallery brought together 14 artists from 7 different countries. While most group shows are based on the similarities of the artists involved, this one highlighted differences. As the title suggests, size was the determining factor. While the large number of works and the relative smallness of the gallery did not allow for dramatic contrasts, say a Kounellis next to a Morandi, there were nonetheless various striking contrasts. The imposing dimensions of *Heptacross*, a stately geometric abstraction by the Belgian painter Marc Maet, dwarf a diminutive watercolor by James Hansen; a massive clot of sticks and mud by Petah Coyne hangs from the ceiling, while huddled in a corner, barely noticeable, is a group of small terra-cotta sculptures by Luigi Campanelli. Another easily missed piece was a wall sculpture by Zizi Raymond, a young New York artist. A metal stool was attached to the wall at a height of some 15 feet on which a pair of black shoes was placed, their tips peeking over the edge of the chair, as if the Invisible Man were about to do a death defying stunt.

Bruno Ceccobelli’s *David*, a small mixed media piece utilizing a sling shot more as a pendulum than a weapon, was the only work to specifically address the title of the show. Luigi Carboni, the third of Shainman’s “three C’s”, offers what might be called “arte povera of the mailroom” in which cardboard shipping tubes have been painted and placed on a series of racks together with a couple of metal rings and a black ball. Inhabiting a middle ground between sculpture and painting, Carboni’s piece, *Gas Ape*, possessed an off-hand originality that made it one of the best moments of the show.

“David and Goliath” also included three Canadian artists : Tom Dean, Michel Goulet and Michael Snow. Snow, who has long been absent from the New York scene but is still accorded respect for his early experimental films, was represented by a large photograph showing a table of ceramic sculptures. By painting directly onto the photograph Snow has given each of the ceramic pieces, which he made himself, strange colorations that are at once luminous and pastel. Michel Goulet is represented by one of his rifle series, *Lead Bread*. In this piece the usual eight old fashioned rifles, opened at the breech, are leaning against the wall with a pair of elongated metal tongs next to each gun. Balanced on the top of each barrel is a volume of an



David Humphrey, 1988 Photo: D. James Dee

encyclopedia with a circular hole cut out of it and on top of each volume a thick slice of bread cast in lead. For this viewer *Lead Bread* suggested a capsule history of 19th century life on the plains of North America: rifles to shoot Native Americans and buffalo, tongs for making horse shoes and wagon wheels, encyclopedias for lonely self-education, culminating in the inedible bread of the White man's bitter harvest. Tom Dean showed a floor sculpture consisting of four cast steel objects. Various biomorphic and specific, they seem concerned with metamorphosis — in one piece a snake turns into a spoon — though the sense of mutability did not extend itself to the material which was employed in a too matter-of-fact manner. Dean has done much better work: his surrealist tables and "Cousin It" wigs. A more successful transformation was achieved by Paul Bowen's untitled sculpture in which a real fish tail protruded from a sphere apparently made of shoe soles.

"David and Goliath" also included work by Robert McCurdy, Ulrich Diekmann and Willi Kopf. *David Humphrey at Cone Editions* — David Humphrey is a New York painter in his early 30's who shows regularly at the prestigious David McKee Gallery. (McKee was Philip Guston's dealer and continues to show a seemingly endless number of marvelous paintings from Guston's last years.) Hard on the heels of a show of paintings at McKee, Humphrey recently unveiled a group of etchings at Cone Editions.

The two strains of painting that come together in Humphrey's work are surrealism and organic abstraction. Most of us would like to have things both ways but common sense tells us that we had better choose what we're best at and stick to that; Humphrey, whether because he is foolhardy or simply able to entertain two opposing ideas at the same time, refuses to follow this sage advice. His work juxtaposes incompatible presences. This, of course, is nothing unusual in modern art, but what distinguishes Humphrey's work from the modern and postmodern taste for non-sequiturs is chiefly the unified space he positions his mismatched elements in. He does not juxtapose in the manner of a David Salle, that is to say, meaning is not achieved through simply colliding two different spaces

or discourses, rather the contradictory elements are forced to inhabit a single space simultaneously. In cinematic terms, Humphrey favors *mis-en-scene* rather than *montage*. Look, for example, at his etching *Plug*. The woman's head and shoulders, the floating chunks of landscape and the oozing biomorph embody three different kinds of painting and seemed to have suddenly been "beamed down" to the same rectangle yet — and this is what gives the work its particular uncanniness — they respect each others' presence. The biomorph does not overlap the floating islands, the shadow under the larger island does not overlap the woman's head. Though he breaks some rules, Humphrey carefully follows others. (For example of the rules he breaks, notice the different light sources used for the woman's head and the floating islands.) This mix of techniques, with a surrealist-flavored figuration predominating, is not particularly fashionable these days, nor is Humphrey's rather literary psychological probing, but he would be foolish if he let fashion set him off his chosen path, for it is often through persevering in "wrong" directions that the most valuable, and eventually universally acclaimed results are reached, as the example of Guston so forcefully proved.

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Ilya Kabakov at Ronald Feldman — In *La vie: Mode d'Emploi*, the French novelist Georges Perec's masterpiece, the reader is systematically introduced to the various inhabitants of a Parisian apartment building. As the omniscient narrative moves through the various floors and rooms, Perec gradually overwhelms us with a profusion of details and stories about each resident, as well as all the former residents, until a kind of encyclopedic epiphany is reached and the book's improbable characters become synonymous with the first words of the title. A recent installation by the Soviet artist Ilya Kabakov, at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, achieves much the same effect through similar means. Before addressing this installation, titled *Ten Characters*, perhaps a few words about Kabakov would be in order.



Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment*, 1981-88. Photo D. James Dee

Born in 1933, Kabakov has been making art since 1955 and exhibiting in the haphazard way that is the lot of “unofficial artists” in the USSR since the mid-1960’s. A resident of Moscow and a Soviet Jew who has shown no interest in immigrating (“I have to go on running where I started,” he has said), Kabakov, together with the painter Eric Bulatov and others, belongs to a loose knit group of Soviet artists who are only now becoming known to the West, and perhaps, under the still leaky umbrella of *glasnost*, gaining some protection from censorship so that their compatriots will have equal access to their work. For Kabakov, one suspects, as for many other East European artists, such access is vitally important since much of their work is addressed to the specific conditions of the society they live in, and nowhere is this more the case than in *Ten Characters*.

For this installation Kabakov took, as his starting point, a “typical” Moscow apartment in which ten tenants, crowded into small rooms, share a communal kitchen and bathroom, but once past the basic floor plan the stories rapidly diverge from the expected. Two examples will suffice to indicate Kabakov’s methods. Along a hallway, between an empty room and the room of “The Untalented Artist” we find “The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment.” Looking into the room, whose walls are plastered with posters celebrating the achievements of the USSR, we see the remains of the catapault that launched the man into

space and, looking up, notice a gaping hole in the ceiling. A text on the wall tells his story. *Ten Characters* is filled with texts and to read them all, in the poor light that is no doubt typical of such apartments, makes demands on the reader that are closer to a volume of short stories than an art exhibition. While this taste for the text makes sense in light of Kabakov’s conceptualist leanings, it is also true that he possesses a real literary talent. In a dossier provided by the gallery one is able to read all the texts from the exhibition and, rather than seeming mere supplements to the visual experience, these pages are completely absorbing in their own right. Weaving together his own comments with statements by the characters, observations of their neighbors and “official” documents, Kabakov reveals himself to be an important Soviet writer as well as artist. But then, in totalitarian societies the written word has always been more important than visual art, if only because it is easier to distribute and hide.

At the end of the exhibition we meet “The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away.” The walls of his room are covered with rows of hundreds of objects, each with a label underneath it. Making your way through the gloom, you approach one of the objects — a small fleck of unidentifiable dried matter — and then read the label: “from a cucumber.” Another crumb is labelled “bread”, while others are identified more vaguely: “fell off the electric range,” “maybe a mouse dragged it in,” or, simply, “don’t know”. Some objects we can recognize on our own, for instance a ballpoint pen refill, but Kabakov, or rather “The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away” informs us: “dried up point, bought a whole bunch, all of them turned out useless.” Reminiscent of Daniel Spoerri’s cataloguing of tabletop minutia, this collection of trash is at once sublime and hilarious. While much of the humor and significance of this show is probably lost on those of us who aren’t familiar with life in the USSR, *Ten Characters* works on other levels besides a wryly poetic look at a place we don’t know enough about. Each of its characters (some of the others are “Ten Man Who collects Opinions of Others” and “Ten Man Who Flew Into His Picture”) can, without too much effort, be seen as not so metaphorical representations of artistic production, indeed as mirrors of Kabakov himself. Without sacrificing any of the poignancy of his individual characters, Kabakov also offers a typology of artists — much as Perec did in his extensive novel — and, by bringing them together along these crowded hallways, suggests that, whether in aesthetics or politics, what is of singular importance is that we learn to live with one another. And a corollary to this is that we have more to learn from our neighbors, even distant ones, than we ever imagined.