

ETC



## Recent collages

John A. Schweitzer, *The Arcadian Suite*, Galerie Chritiane Chassay, Montréal. June 17 - July 22 2000

Melanie Reinblatt

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Number 52, December 2000, January–February 2001

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35714ac>

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### Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

### ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

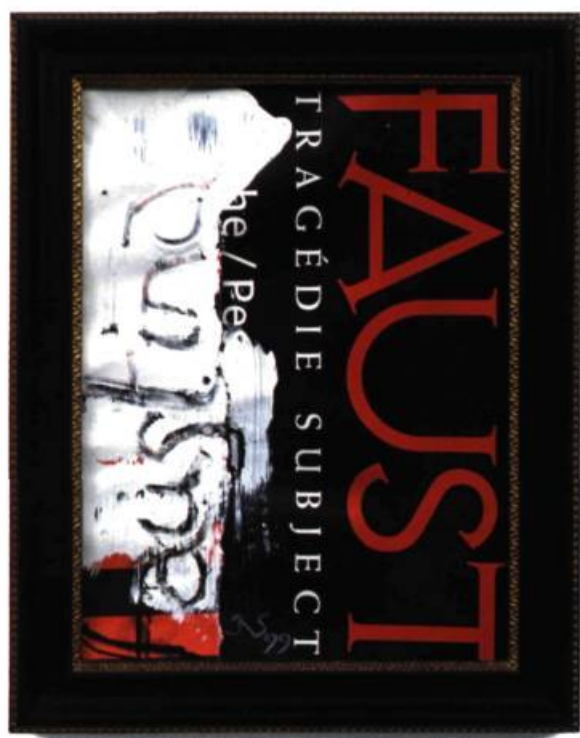
1923-3205 (digital)

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### Cite this review

Reinblatt, M. (2000). Review of [Recent collages / John A. Schweitzer, *The Arcadian Suite*, Galerie Chritiane Chassay, Montréal. June 17 - July 22 2000]. *ETC*, (52), 53–54.



## ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

Montréal

### RECENT COLLAGES

John A. Schweitzer, *The Arcadian Suite*,  
Galerie Chritiane Chassay, Montréal. June 17 - July 22, 2000

The *Arcadian Suite*, the fifth and latest in a series of collages, which span a decade's production, completes a sequential trajectory of very personal investigations. Each series records an inner passage, at times a very dark passage. This suite is loosely based on the 24 verse cycle, the *Roman Elegies*, by Goethe. In neoclassical enthusiasm, Goethe, who lived during the Enlightenment, turned in admiration to the urbane yet libidiously tinged poetry of the ancients, like Ovid and Catullus.

In the *Roman Elegies*, Goethe describes his journey from his home in Northern Europe and a life of sober rectitude from the Weimar court to a sunbaked Italy, where he embraced the warmth and sensuality, as well as his Roman mistress, Faustine, a lusty courtesan, on the bawdy side-streets of Rome.

Goethe's narrative carries within it a series of divergent couplings, including the Teutonic north/Latinate south paradigm. Fundamental to Schweitzer's

practice has been the ongoing investigation of transmutability between these disparate states, which Schweitzer commonly refers to as "binary opposites". Goethe's paean to, if not to ideal love, to earthly passions, holds many possibilities for Schweitzer's itinerant polemics. In his collages, Schweitzer revels in counterpointing the strictures of moral probity and reason against the expanded realm of the flesh and the passions. When Goethe arrived in Rome, he discovered not an imperial Rome [which Schweitzer employs as a paradigm for "the built world"] rather a sordid, flea-bitten, eighteenth-century Rome, long past its prime.

Negotiating these opposites, creates a state of flux, at times anxious and destabilizing, at times full of serendipitous disclosures, creating resolutions where none existed previously. Collage, as it turns out, seems to be the perfect vehicle for these explorations. The act of assembly, of ordering the fragments of collage allows a set of relationships. A collage fragment

may individually be literal or allusive. The fact is, is that each collage fragment is the bearer of meaning, and placed in proximity to another fragment, will alter meaning by various degrees. The quality of the relationship, will be a direct function of the positioning of the fragment.

*The Pilgrimage*, Schweitzer's second suite detailed an inner voyage of pain and the precarious road to redemption. By *The Arcadian Suite*, the prodigal artist has long returned home and been saved. He ponders the possible benefits of another kind of journey. A small chapel, or "refugio", is the sole architectonic element found in *The Pilgrimage* series. Weary and afflicted pilgrims coursed their way through the unforgiving Spanish landscape. These crude shelters provided their only physical and spiritual shelter.

The role played by architecture is considerably more prominent in the *Arcadian Suite*, in fact a series of variously appointed rooms, or interiors, inhabit these collages. They too resonate with hermetic spirituality, albeit secular. In *Mon Berceau*, we see the interior or a finely proportioned room. This is a highly organized rational yet finite space – without a ceiling. The German word, "ur", means "original", in English. Our initial impulse is to rise up and out into the external world and to seek all that can be found there... sun, sky, sex and passion – the Dionysian energies. "Ur" slightly altered to "uhr" changes its meaning to "time". Do we conspire to escape the confines and compromises of the well-defined interiors we have built for ourselves? Or is "what has been" only a passing reverie? A thin gauze stretched across this interior of the Enlightenment chamber adds another dimension of meaning; one less readily perceived. Do the exigencies of the external world prohibit our occupation of worlds more private? Does the true locus of the "original" experience lie within not without? In this collage, the signifiers waffle ambivalently and "binary opposites" do flip-flops. Schweitzer's dialogic arabesques are supple and pliant. In conversation, he has often alluded to the concept of "entropic collapse" where meaning undergoes erosion. In this sense, Schweitzer would call his Modernistic practice less nostalgic than subversive.

A miniature figure is perched on a desk. He is the writer. Writing for Schweitzer is crucial as a way to mitigate and mediate experience. In this sense, the "red crosses" in the *Pilgrimage* series, emblematic for the real stone crosses along the path, marked the first tentative steps of the pilgrim's progress.

In *Uccello Rosso*, there is an aggregation of fragments that are analogic, literary and perceptual. A "bird of words", flies over two of three horizontally-placed panels, the bottom panel Goethe's *Urfäust*, the middle, a slightly ajar window. Pointed in the direction of the censorious eyes of the upper panel, the bird sails over a ground of crimson red. Has a book of *Red Bird* matches, given the creative breath and spark to the writer? The sensual and emotive enterprise here figures as essential for the writer.

In the *Urwald* collage, Arcadia is reconsidered. A Greek travel poster, a photograph of scruffy, grazing ground, stands on its side, something less than a bucolic paradise. Buildings in an etching, one "male", one "female", also float in supine mode. It seems there really is something more askew about this prototypical couple "than meets the eye". This Arcadia holds diminished expectations. Perhaps Arcadia is not what it seems or once seemed to be. The temporal displacements afforded by this collage, draws us back to a restrained stroke of paint and the "here and now" and a certain equanimity.

A shopping bag handle evokes several possibilities in *Tempio di Venere*. Ear, questionmark, heart or more menacingly a venomous snake, with overtones of desire and disease. A similar line of black paint, fresh from the tube, squirms, spermatazoid-like, over a sunny ochre surface. Its proximity to a female face in a needlepoint reproduction of a detail from Gericault is disturbing.

Within Schweitzer's faux-gilt frames, Faustina takes on a variety of guises. Schweitzer acknowledges that his unprecedented use of the heterosexual model has its inconsistencies. The kept woman of "Alme Sol", becomes a woman with her own erotic agenda in *Wiederfinden*, turning up on a Wooster Theatre Group program alluding to Gertrude Stein's modernist comedy *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*.

The correspondences set up in collage fragments are not always confutational. Faustine's name is given equal prominence in the *Faustine* collage, on a theatre poster for *Urfäust*, a recent play by Denis Marleau adapted from Goethe. The dynamic mechanism here is osmotic, wherein Faustina assumes the identical status as "Sujet de la tragédie", as Faust himself. The ongoing process of reconstitution which connects one collage to the next, results in a slippery reciprocity between the ironic and the authentic.

Over the pediment of Schinkel's Reichstag, Schweitzer scrawls his signature as an act of defiance against the excesses of the rational of the third reich, in *In His Own Image*. The porcelain Faustine breaks under the weight of a militaristic male culture. The peripatetic artist takes one road that firmly does not lead to Rome, but to the "Sheltered Room", a place of retreat. A bilious green swatch of colour reminds us that the Arcadian passage has not been without its price.

In the *Terra Incognita* collage, it is a worn letter 'A' that announces a very sombre Arcadia. The light of reason falls on a column, an interior space constructed of vertical lines reminiscent of the column, and an envelope with an architectural designation. The *Arcadian Suite* is a set of ontologic ruminations. The entire suite is a salvatory epilogue.

MELANIE REINBLATT